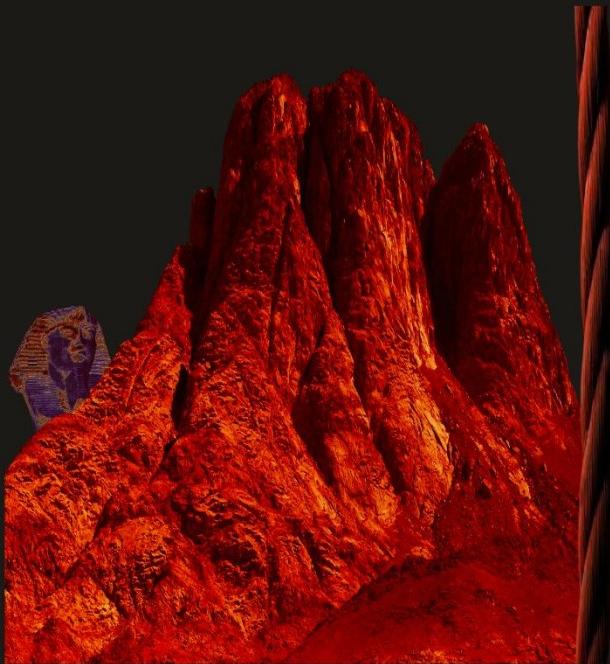


Vampire Shadows

COMING OUT



Steve H Hakes

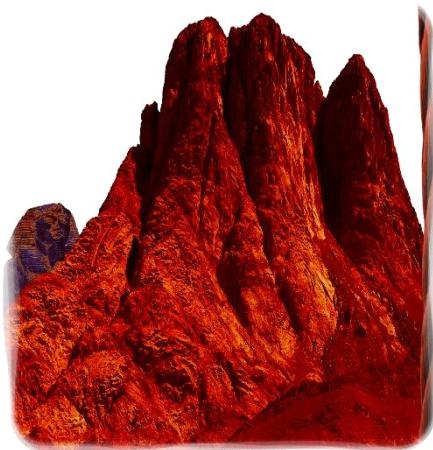


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Vampire Shadows

Coming Out



Steve H Hakes

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Paperback ISBN: 979-8-3914551-9-6

Hardback ISBN: 979-8-3914570-9-1

E-book Copy ISBN: n/a

V250520141521: simbolinian@outlook.com

Thanks to...

- Sheridan Le Fanu's non-lesbian, *Carmilla* (1872)
- Christian songwriter/vampire writer, Sabine Baring-Gould's, *Margery of Quether* (1891)
- Bran Stoker's folk-Catholic, *Dracula* (1897)

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*Who would not love to wander, with Keats in realms of gold?
With Wordsworth muse and ponder, upon the lonesome wold?
With Milton at the portals, of heaven itself to sing?
To soar above all mortals, on Shakespeare's mighty wing?
But these are dreams of glory, that never can come true.
To tell a simple story, is all that I can do.* (Frank Richards)

∞

Standing quietly within the shadows, Zima and Umi looked at each other. As special magicians to the royal court, they had been among those who had proposed the culling of the Ivrim. Once upon a time it hadn't been needed. Do you cull your friends? Truly, the Land of Khem had once been grateful to these foreigners, for a friend in need is a friend indeed. However, with new leadership, that grateful memory had faded into oblivity.

A vivid dream had disturbed the sleep of mighty Pharaoh. In that dream, a winged ram with four heads had come unto him from the north. And three heads bowed low and spoke unto him, and blessed Khem. But before the fourth could speak and bless, an infant boy from the north had shot the head with a poisoned arrow, and had laughed in an unknown tongue. And the blood of the ram did stain the holy river named Iteru, and the divine river turned into blood, and Khem withered as grapes under the wrath of Ra. And behold, enemies did swarm across mighty Khem like locusts, even into the palace of Pharaoh. And the head of Pharaoh was swallowed up by a giant crocodile. And Ra turned into blood and fell from heaven.

That same day Pharaoh had had news of stirrings among his enemies. Had his dream been an omen? Now, the new pharaoh was no xenophobe, but he was rightly anxious about Khem's resident-alien policy. What if many friends, became many enemies? After all, though a number of non-native peoples had become citizens—for various reasons—they still weren't, well, culturally native Khemites. Its history wasn't theirs. They could be turned *en bloc*, radicalised, swarm. Many slaves had been friends.

Pharaoh had taken stock of the internal politics. Externally, he had heard rumours of war from a longterm enemy—one of the Nine Bows. Disturbing intelligence reports had come to his attention. It seemed that this enemy was secretly sowing disaffection among the various foreign identities within Khem, seeking alliances, undermining her social foundation. The enemy was using celeries and sticks. The celery was the promise that the birds in the enemy bush, were worth more than the bird within Khem. The stick was the threat that if Khem fell without their aid, they would be treated as ruthlessly as Khem, their bird beaten dead into the dirt.

Pharaoh was disturbed. After all, if the enemy called forth Pharaoh's army, and then the foreign peoples within Khem betrayed Khem behind its back, then Khem would face the sword at its chest, and the knife at its back. Advice was at a premium. Fortunately, the royal magicians doubled as counsellors to Pharaoh.

It was only to be expected, really. For like the priesthood, they had insight into the spirit-world, and warfare was always more than carnal. Just like the priests, as *hekau*, magicians were within the Magic Circle. Unlike priests, *hekau* who specialised in the magical side of priesthood were called magicians. *Hekau* who specialised in the priestly spectrum of priesthood, were called priests. All counsellors were *hekau*. For what good was a counsellor who was blind to the world of the spirits, deaf to the words of the powers?

But though they had helped Pharaoh to decide on policy, Zima and Umi were not happy. Their fellow counsellors, led by Qebui, had been unanimous. But then, Zima and Umi were not exactly like their fellow counsellors, were they? Their peers were in fact more like babes in the womb, when compared to them.

Admittedly even the unborn of man have little minds of their own. But though they can feel pain and can know their surrounds, so what? Preborn life is so limited and so, well, helpless, so vulnerable to sword and to surgeon's knife. Did they much improve, if allowed the dignity of birth? Why on earth was Usen so infatuated with such pointless human life, here today and gone tomorrow? Messy, undignified life.

Now Zima and her colleague Umi, well, they had been around before the first pyramid was even a twinkle in a pharonic eye, even before

Usen had sparked off cellular life on Arda. Khem was but a footprint in the sands of time, raised from dust, and by dust would be buried. But unlike humanity, they themselves were pneumata, and lived off the blood of the born, the Children of Usen.

For what had once been superfluous, had now become necessity. Long ago their people had assumed physicality for convenience. Now, like their coming to Earth, they had become trapped into biological life, now needing chemicals to survive. They were unlike Powers who needed no blood, though like Powers they had power, theodynamic power. This fact they had to shield from the Khemites. Indeed, even their longterm names were hidden. Blending in was imperative.

It had been to keep in with the crowd, that Zima and Umi had backed the sex-selective post-birth abortion policy. It made some sense. At the end of the day, they were not so much Pharaoh's counsellors, that they dared counsel other than what he was open to hear. Unless, that is, they believed that rubber-stamping his counsel would endanger them as well as him. But in this case, it had been obvious to them that Pharaoh had already made up his mind—*kill off the new-born sons of the Ivrim*. And why not?

And since Usen had permitted the Ivrim to be enslaved, would he not permit them to be slain? Pharaoh had wished his counsellors to sell that policy to him. Politics meant affirmation. His wish was their command. Wise counsellors need to know which advice is commanded, and when. Well, the two pneumata weren't going to risk being dropped from the inner circle, merely for the sake of a few baby brats. In politics, infants and slaves were expendable, especially if you could make money out of it. Commercially, it kept surgeons in silver. Humanity was a strange kind of fish, gobbling up its own.

They had infiltrated easily enough into the membership of the magical guild, in line with their kingdom's policy to study the schemes of the Great Enemy, Usen. Inexplicably he had been at work with the children of Avraam, a rich raiser of sheep. Now, *that* man had been a mixed bag, hadn't he? On the one hand, he had been prepared to give up his inheritor to Usen on demand. That was unwelcome loyalty, dangerous to the Dark. On the other hand, he had been prepared to give up his sister-wife to Pharaoh on demand. That was welcome disloyalty, defending the Dark.

Still, perhaps even disloyalty to his wife merely showed his faith in Usen. For that matter, perhaps both events did. For with the one, he might have expected Usen to return his wife from the palace, unmolested—if he had faith. And with the other, he might have expected Usen to return his special son from the dark halls of the dead. Both the Necros and the Night had looked with suspicion upon Avraam, since such shenanigans. Now they watched his inheritors, the Ivrim, the Sheep, as ever wolf watched its natural prey.

Five Ages of the Edain had come and gone. The Sixth Age of Man was showing tremors, as if Usen was preparing something new. The Sheep had once saved Khem, and now Khem played butcher to the Sheep, and cut deep. Of course, many mighty civilisations had risen and fallen into oblivion, but was Khem the main event, the True Sheep? Or perhaps simply a sideshow? Usen was tricksy. Other big shows were being watched around the world, but ideas, not just nations, could form the basis of Usen's cunning. Had he not already infected Khem through ideas from that wretched sheepherder, Avraam?

Just a mild infection, mind. But Avraam's short stay among them had focused some minds upon Usen, had given impetus to their quest to fathom the unseen world. Neferhotep had later babbled on about the idea of some peerless Power above all powers. Dangerous talk.

Corresponding realities stand behind all true ideas. Certainly Khem had gained some useful but fuzzy ideas about the powers. Certainly some powers had fallen into the Dark. The fallen were the Necros. But some powers were like Usen in unfallen ways, and offered some protection from the fallen powers, the Turannoi. For the unfallen powers included the Guardians, who clubbed together to form many separate Kingdoms. Well, that was deep knowledge, but was it as deep as Khem would fathom? Perhaps, by and large.

Groping for more light, some Khemites spoke of a Hidden One. Was he a power, they asked, but a *primus inter pares*? Or was he Power itself behind all the powers—the Beyond? No, they didn't discount the Guardians, but wondered whether the Guardians were lesser in both substance and in power, created servants of the Hidden One. Formulating all this had proved problematic, but still they tried.

Some, trying to put the hazy into words, said *Look to the sun, the aten. Is it a heavenly door into the Light? Is it from, does it illuminate, the Hidden One beyond? Is it the Heavenly Eye? Is it the Heavenly Face?* Eventually someone—no one remembered just who—called the Hidden One's name *Amun*, and his face *Ra*—or *Aten-Ra*—and his body *Ptah*. Storytellers sold the story town to town for good silver; and is a good teacher not worth their weight in gold?

The first danger for the Dark, had been that the secondborn should first ask as to whether there was one overarching plan of this Hidden One, a hidden plan. And the second danger was, that hearing it they would heed it. Obedience was the worst sacrifice to offer Usen, so far as the Darkness could figure it. Don't give the Ruler an inch!

Mind you, the Necros was more agitated than was the Night—the Kingdom of the Vampires. And the Necros fought tooth and nail against the secondborn gazing upon the Light. So what of the Night? Well, it was content merely to graze upon the secondborn, for whether enlightened or unenlightened, their blood tasted the same. Leave them to their follies—so long as Usen didn't do anything with them to endanger the Night.

No, the Night merely sought the blood of many, not the death of any. Even so, being Dark vampires, they preferred the secondborn to be kept in the dark. Indeed, they neither understood Usen, nor did they wish to. But whatever plans he might have, they were not prepared to forgive him for what he had done to them. He was their sworn enemy for eternity. For had he not unfairly marooned them within the orb of Tellus, of Thulcandra the silent planet, leaving them to rot?

But why should any baseborn mortal know him, follow him? And why should he lead them on? It was all a mystery. Yet since he seemed to show such unnatural interest in biological happenstances—especially those puny pathetic little psuchai called *humans*—most vampires came to despise Usen all the more. Bah! To witness majesty pining for the praise of *les misérables*, was so very *infra dig*.

But that's how it was. He chronically suffered from a queer kind of craving towards vertebrate vermin. Being pneumata, the vampires were genuinely disgusted. Why pander to his whims? Why boost his ego, even by praise from the lips and lives of two-legged vermin that

crawled around the face of the world? If anything, give him curses. Yea, let all the peoples curse his name forever and forever more! But as for the Dark vampires, they were agreed upon being neutral, for that was safest. Heads down and let him be.

Though they sincerely wished Usen ill, it really was much safer not to interfere. To interfere even with his human herd, could bring down his wrath, and could also turn the herd nasty. You neither wished to be punished by Usen, nor to become like Necuratu, dark lord of the Necros. The Necros were their natural allies, but alliances were fraught with danger, fraught with death.

Not that death wasn't pretty safe, so far as it went. Boring, but safe. Trouble was, it wasn't safe enough. No, it simply wasn't strong enough. For beyond death, lurked damnation. Death, a short step from perdition, was best avoided—a buffer zone, still safe but less safe. Besides, the Night had pleasures that the Necros could not enjoy because of its evil heart. So even alliances with the Necros were few and far between. And why never ally with Usen? Well, that would be scandalous, sacrilegious, shameful, sinful. Pandering to the Light was precisely why the Dawn deserved death.

Now Zima and Umi looked at each other with a sigh. Ah well, for now Pharaoh was determined to cull back on resident aliens, and that was that, like it or lump it. "I do not entirely like it," slowly admitted Umi telepathically, "but what else could we say?"

"Indeed," she replied, "I do not know what put it into his mind, but we came too late to object. But the slave peoples *are* growing numerous. He could have reduced their workload, improved working conditions for them, and recruited some into his army. Caring instead of culling. Still, why worry, slaves are cheap."

"Why worry?" asked Umi. "Why, we both know that one of the slave groups are the Ivrim of Avraam. If Usen has plans for them, and if they are abused by our human master, might we not be blamed?"

"Why should we be," asked Zima, "when we aren't directly involved? This is simply human politics. One tribe kills off another. It's a thing humans like to do. And if Usen has plans for this particular tribe, well, don't blame us if they get killed off. He sent them here. Besides, it's not as if Pharaoh means to wipe them all out, is it? He'll just increase infant

mortality rates for their boys for a bit. He won't cut off the stream of slave labour, for it's easier to breed slaves than to capture them."

"Yes, but I still don't like it", said Umi. "Besides, what if the Necros have put the idea into Pharaoh's head? Though we are not of them, we too are of the Dark. Will Usen discriminate between Night and Necros, if the Dark darkens his plans?"

Zima fell silent. Neither she nor he were happy, and these concerns slowly festered in their minds. Who after all were they? They were simply a couple of middle-ranking vampires, who lived in the Land of Khem, and for convenience worked in Pharaoh's inner cabinet, checking the pulse of that people. They reported back to their regional lord, who in turn reported back to Lilith, queen of the Night.

The Night must always know what the Necros and the Light had in mind, so all were agents. Sometimes Lilith's people even served time within the Kingdom of the Turannoi or the Kingdom of the Philikoi, to better divine the pulse of the spirit dimension. While that allowed both wings to woo the Night, the main gain was that the Night kept in better touch with those warring kingdoms.

The queen herself had spent some time with the Guardians, and they had tempted her in vain. Now, untroubled, she soon heard about the intended cull, for telepathy is as swift as telegraphy. But even if Queen Lilith didn't bother about one local glitch, Zima and Umi did. It was their patch. But had they foreseen where these events would go, would they have followed them, or forsaken them?

The months rolled by. It hadn't always been so bad for the slaves, but now Nethaniel was still smarting from the lash. Breaktime natter with a mate offered some relief. "Makir, my friend, all too surely has the arm of the Khemites waxed strong, and this new pharaoh is rather a change for the worse, I think. Why, first he takes many of us away from our former jobs, whether herders of sheep, crafters of wood, servers of houses, or cleaners of their filthy temples. Now it's build, build, build. He's got us building as if his very life depended on it. It's a new city here, a new city there, and a pyramid if you've got nothing better to do. It's a fine how-do-you-do, if you ask me."

"Hush, man, hush on your life", hissed Makir, looking around in horror. "That is your pain speaking, but if the wrong ears overhear, your pain will be ten times the worse, skin flayed off your back, not just your back flayed. Mine too, like as not. Walls have ears. Come, let's move a little away from this wall, where we may speak a little more freely."

Having done so, Makir began again: "Nethaniel my friend, the whip has become a little too common for us all. Yes, we can all look back to golden times in Khem, but those days have rusted under this new pharaoh. Now it's best to bite our lips, lest we lose them. Like what's his name—do you remember? Like you, I never really realised how some of the locals resented our privileged position, until now.

"And now it's too late, since the tide has swung, and forgetting how our privilege helped them, they seem to think that it's payback time. I guess they've written us out of their history books. And like a flock of camel birds, they bury their heads in the sands. They just don't want to remember that we came to their rescue years beyond count. It's as if now those years don't count. No, they even forget that we've been a blessing to them ever since. It's downright unfair and mean-spirited. Still, we simply must knuckle down and take whatever they give. And we must keep quiet about injustice—yammering on will only make things worse."

That was a sore point. The two friends sat quietly together for a while. There is some comfort in sharing the lull of the trenches, while hell rages overhead. This was an official breaktime, for all work and no play makes Jacio a dull boy. They might be swine, but the Khemites knew that proper resting meant better productivity. Even camels and horses needed rest, the better to perform. But the horns would soon

blow to begin work again. “I have heard rumours that Khem is under threat from the Nine Bows, and that we’ll be given a chance to rebel once the fighting begins. Do you really think that our luck will turn, Makir?”

His friend wasn’t sanguine. “I don’t know much about luck, but I can’t see that it could get much worse for us if we did a bit of payback. If Pharaoh is thrown down, we’d be thanked by the winning side. If Pharaoh won, the most he could do would be to send us into death. But no, he’d lose a lot of handy slaves, if he did that. I guess he’d simply flog us all—and he does that anyway—then send us back to work.” Horns were now sounding in the background. He looked around to check whether anyone was in earshot. “No, I’d turn the hammer against the traitor foremen, soon enough, as long as there was some chance to turn the tables on them. In this world you’ve just got to make your own luck.”

“Well mate, it’s back to work we go”, said Nethaniel. “Hey, if anyone of those blighters asks what we were talking about, let’s just say that it was about Hoglah—she is with child, is she not?”

“Yep, she’s getting big. But it’s not a good time to bring our children into this world, unless the war goes well. It ain’t nothing but a living hell, I tell you, built by mixing our blood with their mud. By the way, you don’t *really* believe that we’d be questioned about our little chat, do you?”

Nethaniel looked gloomy. “Someone from the Shuthelahites was telling me only the other day, that he’d been given the third degree after a harmless little natter in private. I reckon the foremen are getting a bit jittery. They’ll be putting gags on us, next—curse the traitors! Anyway, I’ll see you after our shift, all being well.” Makir preferred denial.

Before the previous pharaoh had died, Makir had owned a sizeable flock. He had done quite well, and the people of Khem had not done too badly either—fairness and respect between peoples. But the new lord had said that all former debts had been paid back to the Sheep People, with interest. This one was very much of a nationalist, and had demoted many of the Sheep People from top and middle level jobs, stealing their silver. He had immediately sacked all foreigners from the Foreign Office, unless they were of petty people. He was so paranoid about having powerful enemies within.

For Makir, the rest of the day went on as usual, and none of the overseers questioned him as to what he had spoken about with Nethaniel. Still, it had been as well to have prepared a ready reply, a

judicious lie, much as he loved truth. For he knew of someone who having been questioned, had said that he had simply forgotten what he and his friend had spoken about. A whip had swiftly unloosed that man's tongue, and two executions sealed it forever. For encouraged by the lash, they had both seemed to remember a different conversation, proof positive of conspiracy. In evil days, one must be well prepared. Still, it seemed that Hoglah would keep her husband for a bit longer, and their unborn baby would keep its daddy.

He knew of a woman who had been a single parent. Not a bad lass, really—these things do happen when feelings run loose. So far as he knew, the father hadn't died, but he hadn't lived as a husband. Sadly her child, not having grown up with a real father, had not turned out as well as might have been—a bit of a bully, really.

Well, all being well, their own child would turn out a darn sight better. But then, if they had a son, there was a fair chance that he wouldn't have a chance to turn out good or ill. Pharaoh's policy was now public gossip, and what was meant to be secret policy was pretty much known or guessed in the public domain. For people were beginning to piece together what had been happening, and why: the Nine Bows had opposed Pharaoh's coronation.

In the palace, his Great Royal Wife was troubled; his Grand Vizier fell silent and looked to the Four Winds. For these four were the chief magicians, who each claimed to be the voice of each of the wind divinities of the north, east, south, and west, and thus were these counsellors called Winds. Maybe his advisors had pushed him into a knee jerk reaction to this threat. Who knows. Speculation, sure, but it seemed fairly clear that fear among the top dogs had led to the stronger foreign groups within Khem, being demoted into weakness, their fangs pulled lest they turn and bite. Many of the men had even been put into work camps, to mould clay bricks until they dropped as dead flies. Death Camps, they were called. And not enough flies had died to please Pharaoh—*kill their helpless maggots?*

Yes, it now seemed clear that Pharaoh had concocted a secret scheme to cull foreign boys at birth, at least among the larger people-groups. That had signally failed among the people of Avraam. For their midwives had supported their people—*first do no harm*. Had Pharaoh had any sense, he would have made sure that midwives didn't serve

their own people. That might have reduced their reluctance to kill their charges. But then, most foreign midwives hadn't been too fussy about infanticide even among their own, though those of Avraam might have protected even foreign babies. Avraam had had a very different mindset about human life. Under Pharaoh, foreign families were suffering, with few baby boys surviving into boyhood.

Avraam's special line, the Tribes of Iakov, guessed that the midwives of other people-groups had simply caved in under orders, killing just enough of their baby boys to save their own skins from Pharaoh, and sparing just enough to avoid being lynched by their own people. Smart, but still you wouldn't find that sort of ambivalence under Avraam, for he had raised his family with the idea called *imagodei*, the idea that every human being was spiritually special, from conception to natural death, even the commonest holy compared to mere animal life. Unlike their divinity, many seemed not to care.

So, when sons began to be at a premium, the foreign midwives covered their backs by peddling the lie that their divinities were punishing the people. Come on, pull the other one, why don't you? Well, why should such women confess the truth to their own miserable people and weeping households? In fact, the lie made some sense, in that the suspicious plague of male delivery deaths, didn't affect the peoples of Khem or of Avraam.

Well, among the Avraamites, the midwives were just doing their job, but their best was too good for Pharaoh. It seemed to him that if he couldn't cull boys one way, he would cull them another way. Now the gloves were off for the children of Avraam, and only for them. He adopted a public policy to kill *all* their infant sons, warning that if the midwives weren't seen to comply, he'd escalate the order to all *births*. His will would be done on Earth. So, they were back to square one. Should they kill their boys to save their girls? Yet they reckoned that they should first do no harm. Let Pharaoh do what he would. *Let any sin be on his head alone, we will not be complicit.*

After the midwives had made lame excuses to Pharaoh, at the risk of open rebellion he ordered his own people to go door to door checking for infant sons, and to remove them all from their unfit families into State ownership—he called it State Care. *We the Almighty State, will call your children our children, and we will protect our children from*

you bunch of misfits. There was shame in the sham, for at nights the State would simply kill those it had stolen, dumping their bodies into the Iteru, to drown without trace, or dropping them down the sewers. The river crocodiles wept not; the sewer rats rejoiced. For among the Ivrim, their little lads simply weren't surviving in childhood, and under hard labour their men were slowly falling into death.

Early days, but if things carried on that way for a few more years, to enter the adult world their girls would have to marry foreigners. Then what would happen to their unique gift, the covenant? It had evolved from an individual thing that Avraam passed on to one son, and from son to one grandson. For from the chosen grandson it had expanded to the tribes—all his sons and all their children, were to be a great nation. From person, to person, to person, to persons, to people. For Iakov the Chosen One had agreed with Lahveh the Suzerain Giver, that the covenant should extend to all his descendants through the male line, as a communal thing, as if all his sons inherited it jointly.

Yes, at the House of El, Iakov had pledged his whole family's servitude. He had committed his sons, and their descendants, to pay the vassal tribute of the tithe, in order for them to have the patronage of Lahveh. And what greater inheritance could anyone bequeath? His line had been proved by the covenant, and his line had proved the worth of the covenant. He had had his downsides, but he had had the insight into what Lahveh had planned. He had seen Lahveh's face, so to speak, and found favour for life.

But now, generations later, Iakov's bones were bone dry. Pharaoh had begun first to lop off the branches, and then begun tearing up the root of the Tree of Iakov. Could that tree survive, being still so small and fragile? *Please Lahveh, say that it will not die!*

Some had begun a fight back, a resistance movement. Khemites became afraid to enter and steal the infant lads, and only a few soldiers could be spared for daylight raids. So some among the tribes were secretly turned, becoming undercover operatives for the State. Clothed in Khemite gear, they would mask themselves, then in a group reave any house suspected of harbouring a baby boy.

Oh yes, insiders knew exactly where babies had been born to their own people, but few suspected who the Night Reavers were. Unlike

the midwives, they didn't give a fig for the covenant, nor for infants being imagodei. After all, why stay true to Avraam's precepts, when Lahveh had left his covenant people to fend for themselves? *First, do not be harmed. Second, if you harm, get well paid.*

Khem promised to ease the lot of any slaves who betrayed the mothers of their own race. This promise of reward was clever, also helping to divide the slaves, making them less able to rise up against Khem if any of the Nine Bows did attack. So it was, from Pharaoh's point of view, a win-win scenario.

That day, Makir didn't manage to talk any more with his friend. He returned gloomily to his home, for reflecting of Pharaoh's abortion pogrom weighed heavily on his mind. His wife's too, as it turned out. Hoglah was unhappy. Even before he sat down to rest, she popped the question: "Makir, have you decided what to do if we have a son?"

"Alas no", he replied with a shake of his head. "I've sounded out one or two men from other peoples, to see whether we could adopt him out. Some lesser peoples are exempt from Pharaoh's policy, and I'd prefer any son of mine to be live among the Goyim, than to die among us. Who knows, maybe we could buy him back as if a slave, should the sun ever dawn on us again."

Hoglah fancied that this could work, but feared that they would have to pay dear to have him adopted, and perhaps more to redeem him—un-adoption. As to adoption, a foreign household adopting a son of Iakov could be punished. It was fair to factor that risk into any deal. And since a young child is a net loss, the adoptive family might understandably demand money or goods to compensate for loss of income for his years of worthlessness. And as to redemption, in later years when he became profitable, the adoptive family might well demand money or goods to compensate for loss of potential income.

Pay-pay. Could they afford for him to have some kind of life? Please Lahveh that they had a daughter tucked snugly within, even if she would have to marry outside of her people. Of course if he could afford it, any Ivri man could marry any number of women. But nowadays, affording extra wives was a luxury which few could afford. And if adopting out a son was risky, hiding one was more so. From her young friend Miryam, Hoglah had heard about her mother who

had been hiding her infant son for some months now. It was a ticklish business, and some households had been caught out and had paid the price. Oh, life could be so cruel. You could die giving birth; you could die because you gave birth. Yet bonding begins between mother and child, even before birth: even unborn infants have a claim on their mothers and fathers for safe keeping. And then after birth, the beauty of new life is easily transferred to the infant. Hoglah smiled.

In fact, Miryam's mother had told her daughter that her baby brother had to be hidden, because he was such a beautiful baby boy! Shortly after, Miryam had shown him to Hoglah, asking whether her baby brother was as beautiful as mother said that he was. Hoglah had smiled. Of course, every mother speaks of her infants as beautiful—well, most mothers, though such beauty tends to fade once the children grow up.

But in this case, it was true enough. It would be such a shame for him to be drowned. *It'll take a miracle*—she had said—to keep him from that fate. Of course, beautiful, ugly, or mostly-in-between, every child ought to be hidden from death, and a shame it was whenever man's cruelty and greed snuffed out children's lives, hiding them by death. Miryam was still a little young to understand adult talk, and so her mother's words had puzzled her in a few ways. Still, she loved her baby brother, and wished that he should be shown off, not hidden.

Still, so far, so good, said Hoglah to herself. That baby was safe for now. But the longer he was kept indoors—even shared between households—the more dangerous it became. For Pharaoh had made it illegal to keep their baby boys, and he punished that sin with a heavy hand. And the Powers of Khem seemed many times more powerful, than the quiescent Power of Iakov.

Rightly or wrongly, way back from the days of Avraam, his principal heirs had limited themselves to this power named Lahveh, who had even set up a covenant with them—a somewhat unusual, you could say unique, relationship. Many now grumbled that this limitation was now the real problem. *Get more powers, more Guardians*, they said. Hadn't ignoring the Powers of Khem, stirred up their resentment?

But others scorned that idea. According to them, Lahveh would only guard them if they didn't welcome any other powers. They added that

admittedly things were deeply desperate now, but he had shown his power when he led them into Khem, saving both them and Khem. He who had been sufficient was still sufficient—if only he would come back to them. That's what Hoglah believed, anyway.

As to why things were a mess, opinion was divided. Had they offended Iahveh? Had he fallen out with the Powers of Khem? You could hardly expect him to fight them all off, if they all turned against him, could you? A minority floated the idea that maybe he was testing them, perhaps refining them. But when questioned further, these folk couldn't explain what on earth he would refine them from. Not surprisingly, few bought into that idea. But when all was said and done, the powers had their own agendas. They weren't bothered about refining their worshippers, so long as they were properly wined and dined by them. At least, that's what was commonly said.

That the powers tended to collect worshippers according to their own image, seemed pretty obvious. For example, among the Khemites, the less noble tended to praise Set, slayer of Osiris, while the nobler tended to worship Osiris, terror of Set. There were clusters of powers in both camps, and Khem was big enough to accommodate both factions, having temples for all. Then into this mix came Iahveh, who as a foreigner simply didn't fit in. No, to most it seemed that whether Iahveh was fighting their corner or not, he was simply outgunned and outclassed by the Powers of Khem. Why worship a loser?

As for Hoglah, she was loyal. Looking up, she saw Miryam enter like a ray of sunshine which stood watching herself, wondering on what paths her mind had just been wandering. She smiled a weary smile, as the sun lowered in the sky. As the sun set, they saw on the horizon, a batch of funerals winding their way along the road, Children of Khem being escorted on their way to meet Osiris. A moving sight.

Not that the Children of Iakov were so favoured—or disfavoured. Weary brickmakers were still returning to their humble homes to rest and recoup to endure another day, and no doubt another after that, until their world ended. For them it seemed to be a taxing old world without pay: would Pharaoh never stop building? Households mixed a fair bit, for in those days community, and allegiance to Iahveh, held life together. Miryam played her young part and was welcome.

Strangely, Miryam looked to be on the verge of either lament or laughter. A little worried, Hoglah welcomed her: "Miryam, you come empty handed to us this evening. Please don't tell me that anything has happened to the baby. Or to your mother?"

"No," chuckled Miryam, "everything is fine. Thanks be to Iahveh."

"How is that?" asked Makir. "In these unhappy times, is he not unable or unwilling to help us? We worship, but we do not thank. Why then do you give thanks to him? Have you news to cheer us? Come, sit yourself down lass, and tell us your story. We can all do with a bit of good news in these trying times. Come, sit and have a bite to eat."

Accordingly, Miryam sat down and made herself at home. She didn't, however, immediately get down to her story. It still tickled her, really. It was totally weird, the most far out kind of story. The family sat and waited patiently, for obviously it was going to be a tale worth telling.

"Well," she began at last, shutting her eyes to think, "it all began this morning. Mother had just fed baby, when the word came that we were under suspicion, and were likely to be raided at any time. Mother panicked, and immediately scurried off with baby and me to the daughter of Iteru. Mother had already woven a reed bed and covered it with tar, so that it could float upon the river waters, just in case.

"You see, she reckoned that with baby out of the house, perhaps neighbours' houses would be searched for him. If so, she said that it'd be interesting to see if any neighbour's house wasn't searched. You see, we reckon that some neighbour or another must have dobbed us in. And while most of us wouldn't dream of aiding and abetting our masters, some—mother said—are just greedy for reward. In fact, she wonders whether the Night Reavers are actually our own people!"

"Anyway, she planned to return to the river and retrieve him once any heat had died down. Leaving me, she then went to Asenath, and begged to borrow her baby daughter for the day. It would have been fun if soldiers looking for a boy, found only a girl!"

"Well, the soldiers came and did a search. Then they went and thrashed a neighbour good and sore. Mother guessed that being humiliated, they had blamed him for reporting a boy, when it was only a girl! That was a joke, and served him jolly well right. Mother said that he'd probably be less keen to stick his oar in in future. But then again, she said that he might of course be keener for payback, so we had better still take care.

Though she added, if he squealed, would he be listened to any more than would a pig, or just beaten on the spot as a timewaster?

“Anyway, what happened once she had returned home, leaving me on watch, was just incredible. Baby had floated away down the river and I really panicked. But—thank Lahveh—he then drifted safely back into the reeds. I was wondering what to do, when I heard voices approaching, and I quickly hid. Then some princess appeared, along with quite a few of the royal guards, and her handmaidens. While she was in the river having a cool dip, baby started to cry. Then I feared that it was all up for him, but it couldn’t have been better.

“The guards quickly spotted him and asked the lady whether they should kill him, but she said No. They chuntered that her father would be angry, and she said that they didn’t know where the baby had come from. Maybe, she said, he had floated for many miles, and belonged to Khem parents upstream, or other foreigners, or...she didn’t know but one little baby wasn’t going to make any difference to anyone. Besides, she said, what if Lady Taweret herself had sent the baby all the way down the Iteru, to be adopted by the royal family? If so, killing him would be sacrilege. Well, the guards just went dead quiet and backed off nervously, and the princess had her way. And to support her point, she immediately said that because she had drawn the baby from the waters of life, she would adopt him, giving him a name, a royal status.”

Hoglah broke in: “The power of women to oppose evil and to do good in a man’s world, should never be underestimated.”

Miryam chuckled again, and went on. “I heard her whisper to a maid that he was probably a child of the Ivri immigrants. But, she added, he was so adorable, and she simply must cuddle him and keep him. And after all, her father didn’t need to know—he had too many daughters to bother about, and another child turning up out of the blue would hardly be noticed.

“And of course,” she said to Hoglah, “he still needs milk—he’s only three months old. That’s when the strangest thing happened. The princess suddenly spotted me, staring from the rushes. I pretended I’d been going to bathe and hidden when I saw her people coming. She politely asked me if I knew of any local wetnurses. She knew that bereft of baby boys, some mothers would not be bereft of milk. I mentioned mother, and added that she had just lost her new-born—well, that was true, wasn’t

it? The Lady said that if my mother would nurse this boy, she'd pay her for it, and she'd get over her loss the sooner."

Ever the realist, Makir interrupted: "In short, your brother has been spirited away to the palace, and your mother will be paid to look after him there? But if it comes out that she has deceived the palace, all your lives could be at risk. For the sake of one baby, you have put lives on the line. I hope we will not hear any more of this, and that it will all die away.

"Perhaps your brother will live in a royal house rather than in a hovel, and die in limestone rather than in mud. But my dear—and I don't wish to sound harsh—it might have made for a simpler life, had he never awoken on the river bank. I would to Elroi that he had awoken instead among his ancestors in the cool shade. For who knows, might he not grow up to become a rod in the hands raised against us? For will they tell him of what race he belongs, and if they do, will he feel deserted?"

"But mother will tell him," said Miryam stoutly, "for in royal houses—so I've been told—they wet nurse children until they're old enough to speak. And has Lahveh no friends among the Powers of Khem, that my brother might be a blessing to all? Besides, mother won't desert him."

"Well," Makir kindly said, forcing a smile, "perhaps you are right. But your mother must guard her secret from the palace for now. And if he—for all children are fools—tells them what she will tell him, then the wrath of Pharaoh may yet descend on your house. And if Lahveh has friends in high places, as you believe, you will have need of them then." And he sighed. It seemed to him that Lahveh was so jealous a power, that even to protect them he wouldn't share his people with any other power. And what if he did have friends, he who never spoke of having family? Why should they bother to save those he wouldn't share?

But this conversation was left for a time. Let Miryam enjoy her triumph. Indeed, Makir kept going on and on about the need for all talk about this to end, since loose talk could get back to Pharaoh. But Hoglah, grinning from ear to ear, finally shut him up by saying that if so, the sooner he stopped talking about *not* talking, the less would be said. Everyone laughed. He chuckled gayly: "Ah, a man needs a wise wife to keep him wise."

A number of years had come and gone. The Nine Bows had fallen silent. Construction had hit some snags, and reports had come in about a shortage of both labour and materials. Pharaoh, who liked to have the big picture, had sent Umi to look into details. As a court magician, Umi acted as an immediate interface between Pharaoh and the world of business, but he himself was not a natural administrator. He was simply expected to assemble a small team of appropriate skill sets, to then sort out any problems. The work must go on, or heads would come off. Having enjoyed a midnight snack, he realised that he knew just the man to head up that team under him—Masu.

Masu, as his Khemite family called him, or MoysH, as his nanny called him in her language, was a bit of a puzzle within the royal court. A bright young man from an early age, he was generally quite popular and seldom standoffish. Though a gregarious man by nature, at times he could lock himself down, becoming morose, gloomy, as if the weight of the world was upon his manly shoulders. A handsome man but beyond the bloom of youth. He was definitely not a ladies' man, which caused some concern at court. It was unnatural, folk said, for when female slaves were at his command, why not just take them, indulging in royal prerogatives? It all seemed a little queer, somehow. Behind their sleeves, some blamed his aging nanny, a foreigner, unclean. She had a way with him. Why, she had never even needed to resort to poppy plants to calm him down when he had cried in childhood years. He had always seemed strangely drawn to her, and had insisted that she retained access rights to the court, as if she was a second mother to him—she was even permitted to take her children with her, a high honour indeed. His real mother—well most presumed her to be—always felt a little resentment towards this rival for his love. But in all else, her Masu was a devoted and dedicated son, and even Pharaoh had taken a shine to him.

Eventually his mother had married, and had a number of children. Her husband was a good man, though a shade below royal blood. He too had always been fond of Masu, and had loyally kept his wife's little secret—women sometimes had their little secrets. Clearly even he didn't know the truth. The few who really knew were bound to

silence. It was more than their lives were worth to blab. Besides, she was a good mistress, and well respected among Pharaoh's daughters. Certainly Umi hadn't the foggiest. Still, he had come to respect Masu, so far as he respected any of the little vermin that scratched the surface of the world. Huh, Children of Usen, killers of each other. Why, some were no better than the Necroi. But some weren't all bad. Some were healers of each other. Not that that was entirely good, mind you. After all, it went against the Dark Kingdom's belief that you care simply for yourself. But then, no one is perfect.

Among his own more advanced race, he had known both good and bad apples. And bad could become less bad. For instance, Lókestámo—once second in command to Lord Drac during the Nephilim War—later deserted the Night for the Dawn. Naturally Umi didn't condone such diabolical desertion to the Dawn, but at least Lókestámo had deserted from the Count, who had killed his king and cheezed off Usen.

Few had a good word for Drac. His scheme had led to the vampires coming under the Doom of Usen. You did not want to stir up Usen, and such a renegade deserved his special punishment. But Lókestámo had overreacted, had tried to justify Usen. How dare the sniveller?

But some were good, caring for no one but themselves—as it should be—but sensibly defending themselves by working for the common weal—as they should. Such as Lilith, Queen of the Night.

And her majesty was dead right: the Children of Usen were food, plain and simple—neither friends nor foes. Still, not all food was equal. Somehow, Umi would never drink the blood of Masu, not unless he was the very last of the Children. For Masu he had...respect. Funny really, but generally they were fair game. But even so, Umi seldom drank them bone dry. Indeed, the witless worm that now lay dazed in its bed, would soon bestir itself and rise to its feet. Bar feeling a little drained and a little pained, it would soon be back to its normal duties, none the worse for wear.

Umi had quietly flown in to dine, and his victim had been soundly asleep, so why kill it just for a drop of blood? Unlike some vampires, had he been spotted by the man, he would simply have flown off without incident. Who, seeing a bat on a windowsill, bothers to raise

an alarm? No, humans were not natural foes. But sadly, he reflected, not all of his people believed that. There were indeed, bad apples.

But Masu, now. He'd first met Masu when the creature had entered Pharaoh's diplomatic service. Masu's mother tongue was of course Khemite, but he had also learnt a foreign language from his nanny, and had shown a natural propensity as a linguist for both written and spoken languages. Indeed, he had gone on to specialise in Shemitic laws and rulings.

That was useful. Pharaoh always insisted that ambassadors from the lands around, even from the Nine Bows, spent time in teaching his servants in the Foreign Office. He underlined that if he had court experts in international ways, it benefited all sides, avoiding misunderstandings and needless wars. It was for that and other reasons, that Masu had risen swiftly in the diplomatic service. He could also form his own judgements, without bias and with wisdom. He could be argued out of opinions, but never by bullying or bribery.

The young man stirred in his bed, strange dreams unsettling his mind. Just a little smudge of blood on his bed being the only trace that Umi had visited. That, plus two microscopic puncture marks on the lad's neck, from which Umi had drawn blood. Among the vampires, most could and would make a little blood go far, converting it, regenerating body to keep soul together, though they usually just tasted for pleasure. Umi had no need to linger, and if the boy saw him in his human mode, he would have to slay him.

He resumed his bat form and flew silently through the window into the warm night air. He soon curled up under the eaves of a temple, hanging bat style. Why not rest, when you have nothing more to do until the break of day? Zima soon sensed him out, and joined him, and telepathically they conversed. "Zima, how fares it with you?"

"Umi, greetings. I wish it went better. I have been in flight this night, enjoying the night air and the sights and scents. But the current problem weighs heavily on my mind", she replied.

On the same wavelength, he shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, our pharaoh is paranoid, and a danger to us all. I sense the diaboloi at work, seeking yet another war. For in the effusion of human blood they take their delight. It is not ours to protect the secondborn, but it is better for the

Night if their peace is protected. Why waste blood, simply for the hell of it? Far better to live in peace, and to keep both our anonymity and the masks we wear to face the world of man." Umi sighed.

War was a bother, such an unwanted disturbance in the mundane humdrum of life. Left alone, vampires could enjoy the natural world, and simply wandering around and about was a pleasure, though far below that of their long gone liquid-crystal planet, Simboliniad. Not so for the Kingdom of Necros. To it, Earth held no natural pleasure. The only warped pleasure the Necros enjoyed was sadism, tormenting the Children of Usen to torment Usen. If only they could get their hands on him, lay hands on him suddenly and without warning, they would never forget it. If only just once they could stick in the knife. Unchangeable, they were dominated by revenge, by hatred for all others, whether of their kind or not.

But as the Queen of the Night had said, why punish the Children for their father's sin? Now if she could only get at *him*, or the Huion, or the Ruach for that matter—for they shared that society which is called by his name Usen—she might even joyously join the diaboloi in fantastical fun. They all would wish revenge—in imagination. But Usen was not of the physical kind, not even of the created kind. He had no side to pierce, no hands to nail to a tree. You couldn't get at him, and in reality, you wouldn't dare wish to try even if you could.

Umi spoke again: "I have a team leader in mind. With any luck, he will hopefully pacify Pharaoh and bring stability to these people. He is a man of two mothers, one native, one foreign; one free, one slave; a man of two names, one Khemitic, one Shemitic. Among the secondborn, he bears an unusually high degree of intelligence, and is well skilled in their arts. Moysh is his preferred name, and I shall visit him at the crack of dawn. For why delay?"

Zima merely responded that she hoped the plan would go well, for Pharaoh was wont to kill any of his counsellors who let him down. Sure, Zima and Umi could drop their human guise and flee from death, but the Kingdom of Night required all of its people to keep their true identities hidden from the public eye. Other than death itself, the last thing either wished was to have to drop their human cover in full public gaze, and to flee as bats or as wolves—the two most common alternative morphs for vampires.

As so it was that as the day broke, Moysh was awakened by Umi claiming an audience in the name of Pharaoh. Moysh quickly dressed, and invited the counsellor to break fast with him. Umi declined, saying that he had broken fast not long back, though happy to take a little wine for his stomach's sake—as he stood hugging the shadows. “Moysh, Pharaoh—long life to him—has sent me to sort out the building delays. For the work has already been delayed overly long, and attempts to recommence have soon gotten bogged down. The site managers make one excuse after another, never blaming themselves, but Pharaoh—may his reign be as that of Ra—is unhappy, and so we share his sorrow.

“He has called upon me, Henkhisesui, trusted counsellor of the Four Winds, to raise up those who can build up these cities to his majestic glory. And I come to charge you to find all such as seem good to you, people of wisdom and discretion, who will answer to you alone, and to remove these impediments to building unto Pharaoh’s glory—unto him be eternal praise. Will you take up this charge, or shall I speak unto the face of Pharaoh, that you were unwilling to do his bidding?”

Moysh bowed low, for Umi came not in his own name, but in the name of Pharaoh, and so stood as Pharaoh before him. “Gladly will I find those it seems good to me, people of wisdom and discretion, people who will answer to my face alone. Thus, I will remove such impediments as impede the work of my lord Pharaoh—long life to him.” Satisfied, Umi turned and departed.

Moysh understood his orders. No niceties needed to be observed. Umi was a counsellor, not a friend, and was known to be someone who stood aloof from the many, and stood close to the few, a nonsense man of exceeding power. Most feared him; fools didn’t. Had Umi sought to slay Moysh, he could not have done better than to set him up for a task to fail. And if it failed, not even his Khemite mother—whom he dearly loved—could save him. But to succeed would open the doors to becoming a counsellor. Did he really wish to become a magician’s apprentice, and to learn the lore of magic? What would she whom he named nanny, say of that?

Speedily he got down to work. He assembled a team of reliable people, some of Khem, some of the Ivrim, some of some of the other peoples, both courtly and common. He sought to garnish perspectives from a mixed team. Each answered but to him. Should

they fail, he alone could punish them. Should he fail, Pharaoh alone could punish him. Each team member was issued tablets assuring them of immunity from all but Moysh, and conferring authority unto them to investigate whoever they chose, however they chose. Anyone unhappy with them, could take their beef to Moysh, and to him alone. Up and down the land they went in teams of two. Some went to where materials and tools were obtained and honed. Some shadowed the managers and foremen of the building sites, investigating efficiency, interviewing even slaves at random. Moysh himself sat like a silent spider at the centre of a web. And from all the threads radiating from the web, conclusions began to stir his mind. It seemed to him that Pharaoh had been fed on a load of bull. But he must double-check what his team had explored, before his final report to Umi. He might have but one chance to get it right.

As an interim report—subject to verification—he wrote: *I Moysh, by command of my lord Pharaoh—upon whose face the Guardians look in love—have looked into the slowness of city building dear to his heart.*

Firstly, it seems clear to me that some few of the foreigners, unhappy with my lord, have sought the goodwill of the Nine Bows, and have mindfully sabotaged the straw supplies needed for the making of bricks. For as my lord—long life to him—knows, where there is shortage of stone, clay bricks must be used, and straw makes the clay easier to handle, quicker to make, and reduces shrinkage.

Secondly, at random I myself have questioned one slavemaster, even Yupa, son of Urhiya, to whom is assigned many foremen for the making of bricks. Although set the target of 2,000 best bricks, he had sent but 660, then 410, then 560, but by the fall of the third day had still fallen short by 370. Therefore, in wrath had he beaten his foremen, that they in turn would beat the slaves within their units. He admitted unto me that their hours were over long, and that their sleep was over short, but he seemed to care not. But are they not loyal servants of Pharaoh—the light of their eyes and the radiance of their countenances?

It seems to me that two problems should be addressed. One, that enemies of my lord king—on whom may Ra always shine—must be put down, so that straw, so needed for quicker and better work, shall not be wantonly destroyed. But as to whether to be put down by force that

kills enemies, or by kindness that makes friends, may Guardian Thoth make plain unto my lord. As to makers of bricks, that working hours must be reduced, for more can be done in less time by those who are fresh. Does the lash incline the weak to be stronger than those blessed by Tutu, who refreshes both soul and body? Moreover, if willing slaves were to be set free after 20 years of hard work, would they not work the harder to please?

Yet I shall myself go first to the granaries, to speak with those who protect the straw and to seek the burners thereof. Who are they who sneak in with fire, and who inspires their attacks? The people of the Ivrim once saved Khem by filling the granaries, it is said. May their divinity judge them if, as some allege, they now destroy what once they saved. But there are many people-groups who might do the work of the Nine Bows, and even some divergent among the Khem. We must follow the evidence.

Therefore I shall go unto the city sites, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry which is come unto me; and if not, I will know, that Pharaoh—the delight of my eyes—may have a true story.

Moysh had very soon verified the situation of sabotaging the straw depots, and had added one or two suggestions for his final report. He had then gone among the worksites, dressed firstly as a slave-master, then as a slave, then as a foreman, always keeping upon his person his tokens of pharonic authority. For it would not do to be slain onsite, whether as an idle slave or as a hated task-master!

Onsite he had witnessed injustice, needless suffering, and downright incompetence at every level. There was simply too much hostility built into the various factions—so many oppressed had lost children. Nevertheless, he tried to remain a passive and unseen observer, whose role was reportage, not intervention. But his resolve collapsed, when one day he witnessed a barbaric punishment of a foreman by a task-master. He, dressed as a foreman, felt his blood rise within him. For he knew that his true identity lay with the victims, not the perpetrators. If only fairness had prevailed, the Ivrim would work hard and loyally for Pharaoh, willing horses that did not need to be flogged to death. But flogging made the horses, so to speak, resentful.

Lash upon lash came from the hand of the task-master. Cry upon cry came from the lips of the unfortunate foreman. Suddenly prudence snapped. Moysh sprang into action. No one else was watching what was going down—would any have cared? And this was no mere beating. This was sheer unadulterated murder. Grabbing the lash from the task-master, in red hot anger he lay into him, time and time again, stroke for stroke, and a few extra for bad luck. He didn't lay off flogging him until the body stopped squirming in the sand. Moysh delivered a final strike, then flung down the whip as a snake from his hand. He knew he'd always had a problem with his temper. Usually he bottled it up without lashing out. Overload had had him overlong.

The slave-master had been a sadistic brute, and the foreman had probably failed to deliver his quota of bricks—perhaps he had given the slave-master cheek for good measure. Still, the slave driver's wretched body lay dead, and the foreman lay bleeding in the sand, weeping in pain. The foreman was an Ivri; the slave driver had been a Khemite, the ruling class. There was simply no way to say, Sorry. The bloody deed had been done, and the bloody corpse had to be

buried, quickly. Quickly Moysh picked up a spade which lay nearby, dug a ditch, and dragged the body into it. It was not perhaps a permanent solution, but maybe at night he could unearth the body, leaving it out for scavengers. Many a jackal or wild dog haunting the place could enjoy such a meal. Since they were known to kill, they would surely be blamed.

Tenderly he uplifted his fallen countryman, helping him to a safer place away from the corpse. The hand of his divinity, of Lahveh, was upon him, keeping him hidden from prying eyes. Or maybe it was. But if it was, it was not keeping him hidden from all prying eyes, for a foreman who had seen it all, silently spied on him. To his mind, an unknown foreman had brutally murdered one of the overlords. That could spell disaster for the Ivrim. Was this unknown man an enemy of the Ivrim, seeking to frame and slay them? He must watch where this man went, should the body be discovered the next day. Would the murdered victim not have had a family? Would that family not ask where he was? Would his disappearance not be investigated?

Lying in his special quarters with a heavy heart, Moysh tossed and turned that whole night long. That is, once he got to bed. But before that, he burnt his bloodstained garments. The fire was welcome on that chilly night. Then warmly dressed, he snuck quietly to the construction site for a little unpaid and unsupervised overtime.

He rose early the next day, dressing in his more princely garments. That morning, he began a final tour of the site, intending to leave the next morning with his final report. If he was to keep his head, he must not panic, but must be seen to be just doing his job, and to be totally unaware of the death. Yes, that news must come to him as a surprise. Fortunately his nighttime constitutionals had been fruitful. Not much of the body was left by the time the sun had risen, since the scent of blood carries far to friends of the night.

But that morning, one or two of the workers seemed to be aware of something being up, and were a little uneasy. Had they known that creatures of the night had killed a slave-master, they would have wept no tears. But they did not know that any death had actually taken place. The task-masters were obviously on edge, for some reason or another, and that unnamed reason made the foremen nervy, for unhappiness flowed from top to bottom.

As Moysh walked by, one flustered foreman, oppressed by feeling the fear in the air and knowing of its cause, lashed out at a brickmaker under him for being a little slow. The brickmaker protested that he was working as fast as he could—were they not both Ivrim? But the foreman, anxious to offer no excuse for his superiors to beat him, hit the man again. Suddenly he felt the hand of Moysh upon his wrist. “Stop that. As the man said, you are both Ivrim. Why strike him for doing his best?”

The foreman startled in surprise. Why, here was the unknown foreman, the slayer of the slave-driver. Yet here he was, dressed up as if a lord of the land. Obviously some kind of agitator from the Nine Bows. What was his game? Was it to ingratiate himself into the Ivrim? Was it to incite rebellion, and recklessly get them all killed? Exhuming the body and relocated it had been a smart move, and had prevented his night arrest, but with the discovery of what was left, his fate was sealed. To expose him would lead to promotion—perhaps he would become a task-master. Lashing out his tongue, he viciously turned on Moysh.

“Who appointed you as my leader, that you judge me?” he challenged. “Go ahead then, see if you can kill me as easily as you did that Khemite the other day. I don’t know who you are, but you are no friend of ours. And don’t expect to get away with it, even if you can kill me here and now. No, I saw where you are living, and I’ve reported on you. You’ll get your comeuppance, mister. We’re loyal to Pharaoh, we are. Yah, that’s it, you coward. Go on, run away as fast as you can, before the soldiers come for you. Leave me and my people in peace. We can sort ourselves out, we can, whatever your little game is.”

That was too much for Moysh, who was already backing away. This foreman obviously didn’t know who he was, and thought him neither Khemite nor Avraamite, but an enemy to both! Explanation would do him no good, since he had already been dobbled in—or so the man said. Pharaoh would surely try him for murder. Then it would all come out that the princess had merely adopted him. She would probably be punished too, especially if Moysh was linked to the Ivrim. And then he himself would be stripped of royal protection, and would be mercilessly and slowly killed. Though if lucky, he might die swiftly without his head!

But his trial would endanger his entire people, for if punishing a daughter for taking in a slave, Pharaoh would not spare the people of the slave for his daughter's sake. Yes, he would blame all the Ivrim for the misdemeanour of the one Ivri who had caused this whole ruckus. Moysh saw the full danger in an instant, and in the very next instant he saw its solution. Simple, he could not be investigated if he were dead or fled. The fool of a foreman had spoken like a true prophet—*run, run, as fast as you can.*

Time was of the essence. Even before the foreman had finished his fuming, he turned and wisely walked away, keeping his head. Since the foreman had already set the hounds onto him, he didn't think that the foreman would bother following him. The slave-masters would neither have his name nor rank by this time, only perhaps the soldiers whom Pharaoh would have sent to arrest him. The palace knew where he was lodging. But probably the soldiers didn't, until they made enquiries about who had been living in that house.

He made some turns, checked that the foreman wasn't following, and checking that his quarters weren't guarded, he quickly gathered some travel items from inside, took command of a camel, and rode off in a false direction. His royal robe and token of office, allowed him to freely change camels as he went. Moving swiftly and covering his trail, he was soon leaving the Way of the Falcon—whose glorious eyes were as the stars of the mornings and of the evenings—way behind.

Avoiding the reed lakes, along the road bordering the great Serbonian Bog, he hastened on. Swapping camels at the border fort, in full sight he then thundered off along the northern coastal route until out of sight—for a high official riding rapidly alone must have raised suspicions. He might well be followed, but the fort commander would not dare allow any shadower to follow above the horizon. No, any such tail would aim to arrive at the next fort an hour or so after him. And when not finding him there, they might still fear that he was on a special and secret mission from Pharaoh and so not dare to send out search parties, lest they found what they should not find.

Once out of sight, he soon headed south, keeping up a constant pace, and after a few days he left behind the last of the reed lakes on his right, and welcomed the great waters to his west. That night he lit a fire, partly from dung, and roasted a fresh fish which he had caught.

“Well camel,” he mused, “you and I have a long journey ahead of us. But I think that we may travel a little slower, for now. All being well.”

She looked comfortable. His thoughtful eyes shifted from her to the great waters, and then to the way they had come. Nothing stirred. She merely looked on him with her cute brown eyes, now black in the dusk, and said nothing. Perhaps she was too tired to speak, thinking only that it was time for some shut-eye. She had often been ridden hard, but had never been mistreated by the little loads she carried. She looked down on them for having such weak little legs that they needed carrying, but they were harmless enough. Funny little bipeds, cute in their own way. Anyway, giving him only a long big yawn in response, she stretched out her neck prone upon the ground, hoping for an undisturbed night. Let him chatterbox away, if he must. She at least was a sensible creature, and knowing the value of sleep, shut her ears to the dust and din as he droned on.

With the rising of the sun, he rose upon his camel, and she raised up her man. Then still hugging the great water, they soon turned north, usually keeping the great waters visible to their right. Though occasionally veering westward, in the main they moved ever closer to the rising of the sun, to the coming forth of Ra in his waxing glory. Or so said Khem. Moysh had read the archives of his true people, archives lodged in the palace by his people long ago—they wrote a rather different story.

“Well camel,” he mused as he felt the breeze fly by as had now the weeks, “we’re both a long way from home. You at least know your home. I don’t really know what to call home. My ancestor Avraam wrote many stories for his children, even of times before him. Not those of Khem, but different stories, wonderful stories. Of how he met one divinity in particular, and gave up his family divinities for him. It all seemed to make sense. But Avraam’s divinity has deserted us now, and all we have left are ancient stories.”

She kept up her pace. The biped on her back was making more noises, sad noises, but seemed content to keep going. Funny, at times she wondered whether these little bipeds of funny five-toed feet, were trying to talk. Perhaps like birds, it was some kind of rough song that held some meaning. She had had that discussion with other camels, but most seemed to think that they were merely clearing their

throats, or simply gibbering. Still, it seemed pleasant enough, and she was happy to serve its needs and to go where it directed her without spitting at it. Soon they turned again south, keeping still to the great waters. They had now entered into the Land of Madyan, where the Madyano, a runtish people but fierce, dwelt.

There is little to tell of that journey, for it was for the most part uneventful. He had at times left the way, had even backtracked, to throw off any scent. For once he had left the king's highway, stealth had soon become more important than speed, and he was not such a fool as his camel took him for. Over the long weeks he had met some friendly rovers on his wilderness wanderings, who had entertained him royally, as they did any guest. Against such eventualities, he had stored his royal garments safely away in his travel bags, lest otherwise any he met might speak idle tales of a noble Khemite wandering aimlessly in the backside of the wilderness. He prayed perhaps in vain. He prayed that pursuit might not find him in this new land.

For surely his identity would by now have been discovered. Had Pharaoh—he had never felt less inclined in his whole life to wish him long life—sent soldiers to bring him in for trial? It all depended on a number of things, really, and you could never be sure how Pharaoh would react to the unusual. Moysh hoped that Pharaoh had decided that self-banishment was sufficient punishment. If so, the problem was sorted, and his princess-mother would be safe enough. But if soldiers were on his heels, he was a dead man still walking.

It had been a long and meandering journey, but at last he was beginning to feel safe. He had covered his trail a number of times. He had changed his outer garments a number of times; bought some local ones. He had ample silver rings and gold sheep for barter. And he had good wits, handsomeness, sturdiness, and a bronze sword to keep body and soul together. Besides, now dressed again as a Khemite of obvious rank, he would probably be befriended—few would mess with superpower Khem. At a well he dismounted, and stretched his arms and legs. “Well camel, forty days I have travelled from my doom. Never again do I wish to see that wilderness, as Iahveh is my true lord—though he sees me not. And, as he is my lord, never have I taken any bride, for I would only marry among my own people, but I could never marry among my own people. Now, far from him and forsaken, I feel that

I could marry the first free woman I clap eyes upon, settle down, and have me a few children."

As always, the camel looked sympathetically at him. She felt that he was trying to say something, but humans had never quite learnt how to speak. So she just gave him a commiserating look, and stuck out her tongue to express her sympathy. She really was impressed that the bipeds could build, even if they couldn't properly talk. But why bother building towering towers of stone, when no one lived inside? Strange were the ways of man. At least this one had sense to stop at the water hole, good for beast and man.

As they sat and lay by the well, some sheep were being herded forward. Moysk, not expecting women to be shepherding the flock, looked up in interest. After a furtive month in the wilderness, any woman looked like a princess. To look on the women of the desert dwellers, had been more than his life was worth. But here they seemed heart's delight.

They in turn smiled on him, seemed a bit coy, and exchanged girlish banter between themselves. He guessed that he was the cause for their liveliness. So far, so good. He lazily sat back to admire and be admired. And why not? The land offered tasty fruit to he who had not eaten. But then it all soured, for crabby men came along with their own herds to be watered. It looked like this was a regular squabble.

And indeed it was. Normally the men would arrive first. Some days they were a bit late, and would find to their chagrin that the women of Ragèl—or Yetro as some called him—had already moved in. When your herd is so close to water, why wait if you are first in the queue? It was not that the men believed women to be inferior, nor Ragèl to be inferior, but simply that they were stronger and impatient. They barked and bayed at the women, muscling in, scattering their sheep. And the women, what could they with lesser strength do, but rant and rave at the men?

Moysk was annoyed. Moreover, he had made eye contact with one of the pretties, who had returned his smiles with eyes of pleasant merriment. It was time to take action. Sure, the men were many, but Moysk had been taught the art of war, as well as hand to hand combat, and could hold his own well enough. Nor was he a coward.

Moreover, dressed back into his royal robes, his words commanded respect, and prevented reprisal—or so he hoped. He waded in with his switch, lashing here and there, and the men gave way. If this stranger of Khem sided with the flock of Ragèl, a herdsman-priest, best let him have his way.

So it was that Zephora and her sisters turned from woe to wonder, for at the command of Moysh, the men helped them to water their flock. He said that the sooner Ragèl's herd were watered, the sooner their own herds would be. There was no gainsaying this forceful lord.

The seven daughters of Ragèl returned sooner than usual to their home, leading to some explanations being required. Their father, whose priesthood prevented him overseeing his sheep, enquired about this most interesting stranger. Since he had shown kindness, was he seeking a wife? He had obvious wealth and exalted position, and perhaps was an ambassador of Khem, come to oversee the copper mine. But just what Khem might be after, Ragèl couldn't be sure. Best be kind to this man whom his daughters had invited back.

Soon sitting around the supper table, Ragèl spoke up. "My lord, I owe you thanks. For did you not risk a beating, that my daughters might not beaten be? Now please, tell us of your journey, and why you alone have made it into our land. Yet I fear your story is of woe and death, for many who come through the wilderness, perish within, and you come alone."

Moysh stood up, crossed his arms, and bowed. "I thank you, my host, for your kindness to me. For from woe I am healed by your hospitality to me, a stranger in a strange land. As to my story, in sharing it I entrust you with my life, and indiscretion will be as a dagger to my heart. But if I may dwell with you, I shall be happy to work for you. And I think that I have already proved myself to be of some use."

"Know then that I come not from royal, but from common blood. Nor am I of the people of Khem, but of a people who befriended Khem, but were repaid with woe and death. But Lahveh my divinity, rescued me from the hand of Pharaoh, and brought me safe into this land. For I had not sought the death of one whom I slew in anger, even one of the task-masters of Khem. I fought to save life, yet lost life to my undying shame.

"Say now whether you repent of your kindness to me, and let me freely depart, and swear, if you will, not to speak of me for a space of forty days.

For thus it took me from there to here, and thus it may take me from here to my next there. My life is in your hands."

And more did Moysh say, as Ragèl questioned him more fully concerning such matters. In the end, though, Ragèl threw back his head and laughed out loud and long. "The life of man upon this world of ours is a funny business. You ran from the face of Pharaoh, and ran to the face of my Zephora. Well, I can see that she thinks much of your face, too, as do maybe all my younger daughters. Well, how is this? What if you marry her? Then it would seem to all around that you came here apurpose to wed her. If they believe that you are from Khem let them—so much the better. And you, you will stay with me, yes? And serve as a son-in-law?"

Well, that was the best offer Moysh had had in a long long time. Once upon a time, and shortly after he was told by his nanny that she was his real mother, he had had a dream that he would deliver his people from their slavery. Had he not himself been delivered? Would he, who had been drawn out from the river, not draw others out from Khem, into the land that Iahveh had promised Avraam?

But no. That dream had died in the desert. Wouldn't a hero have stayed and braved it out unto death? The slave-master had deserved it. He, Moysh, had been rather impetuous, sure, but he hadn't intended to kill the man—accidental manslaughter not murder. He'd merely meant to teach that man a hard lesson about mistreating Pharaoh's slaves. But he had fled nonetheless in prudence.

But then, no, had he stayed he might have had to explain why he favoured the Ivri slaves. To admit that he was one of them would have endangered them, himself, and the princess he loved as a mother. Truth seemed to probe deeper. Yes, if only his hide had been on the line, he still would have bottled out. No, even if others were sure not to suffer, he cared for his own hide. No, he was no hero.

He was not the man to deliver anyone other than a pack of girls, and foreign girls at that! And that was being offered to him as a permanent job. In payment, he would take the oldest as his wife. She was a stunner, and she was infatuated with him. So far, so good. Well, when in Madyan, why not take a Madyan to wife? *Settle down lad, and raise a goodly family.*

After a little more discussion, he agreed the offer of his host to join the family. The land had some ancient connection to his ancestry, and apart from connections up north to a copper mine which supplied Khem, and pottery trade with various peoples, the people of Madyan kept pretty much to themselves. Being a small land and sparsely populated, it might easily be taken over one day, but to him it seemed safe enough for now, and Zephora seemed sweet enough.

Thus he made a bridal payment unto Ragèl. Such money would for some years be refundable, if she proved disloyal. And he received a lesser dowry from her side. Such dowry would for some years be refundable, if he proved disloyal. She who had been Zephora's mother, had died years ago, so she does not come into this story. But besides her father and her sisters, she had hundreds of family and friends who attended her wedding. Unlike in some cultures, the wedding took place within weeks of their marriage. But then, Moysh was hardly inviting his family and friends to witness his covenant.

And as usual, before too long a little one had been delivered, though Zephora was a wee bit disappointed that her husband named his son, Ghersom. For in the language of his people, that name showed that her husband still considered himself to be a stranger passing through, rather than really settled down. She knew that she mustn't take it too much to heart: *After all, he is a righteous man, and a good one, even if he does not worship our divinities. At least he is well placed here, and I can't see him taking us far away.* And so it long seemed.

Her father was getting along well with Moysh, and was intrigued by his rather outré idea that his people were to worship only one divinity. Though their ancestor Avraam had introduced that thinking, some weaknesses in it seemed fairly obvious to Ragèl, so it would never be ascendent. No, Terach was right. First, the more divinities you had, the stronger you were. And why limit your strength? Second, any divinity which couldn't tolerate others, bordered on petty jealousy. And why follow a peevish divinity? Third, divinities had specialist powers. Axiomatically, you needed a divinity for rain, a second for fertility, a third to fight in the hills, and a fourth to fight in the valleys. And so on—the more, the merrier. Wasn't it simply daft to limit yourself to one type of blessing? Fourth, one alone would be lonely, so if they didn't know how to look after themselves by

fellowship, how could they look after mortals? If it fell down, it had no friend to help it up, and a three-stranded cord is not easily broken. On the other hand, attending to the whims of the divinities could be a full-time job, and if they squabbled, you could find a friend on one side, and a foe on the other. Only having to bother about one, had the attraction of simplicity, so long as he or she remained on friendly terms. But there you go: if you had only one and fell out, you were left hanging out to dry all alone.

Ragèl knew best, but he was happy to live and let live. In friendly banter, Moysh and he had talked several times about such things over the years. In the end, Moysh had given up on trying to convert Ragèl to his way of thinking, and Ragèl had given up on trying to convert Moysh to his. Each would worship as he thought best. As for Zephora, she was a free agent, and sided with her father.

Moysh insisted that she did not convert unless by conviction, for conversion without conviction would neither help her nor show respect for Lahveh. It was a spiritual, not a social, transfer. Nowadays, ideas unbidden were wont to cross his mind. Was that the way of mysticism? Three ways into conversion crossed his mind. Of the mind, she could follow the evidence. Of the heart, she could experience Lahveh by his ruach. Of the hands, she could be won over by Lahveh people's reflecting his good works, rejoicing in him, loving one another, and so turn her praise to heaven: for is not the sun seen by its reflections; do not its rays lead truly to source? But there was no ultimate need to convert—even though she'd gain enlightenment. No, he minded the flock; she minded the house; she minded her divinities; and he didn't mind. Both had tough jobs in a tough land, which few nations thought worth fighting for.

Set sat alone, pondering the signs that not all was right with the world. By that he meant that that even keel between Light and Dark, the two polar kingdoms of the pneumata, was being disturbed by some tremor. There deep down he dwelt in times of dark disquiet, almost 200 rivers below the world's crust. Now iron encrusted and permeated, he lived and moved and had his being, aware of the physical dimension. Somewhat like a sponge moving within water—yet unhindered—so was Set. He was a dunamos, a fallen power of the Kingdom Class. Of his kind—that of the Turannoi—only one was of the Cosmic Level—Necuratu. All pure spirits live in spacelessness.

Most of his kind were mere third level operatives, diaboloi, infesting the Land of the Children of Usen, enjoying their own perverted pleasures—what other pleasures could they enjoy but the bitter fruit of bitter spirits? As pneumata, physicality was no barrier to them, and heat and cold held neither comfort nor discomfort. They were innately immaterial. They could easily move at will through the frozen fields of deep heaven—if Usen permitted, which he did not—and dwell in the bowels of the earth, in core temperatures about 100 times that of the hottest surface above.

Chained to Tartarus were they. Maybe one day they could hijack one of the Children, and travel within them beyond the orb of Tellus. A flight of fantasy? Sure, they wouldn't get their hopes up until pigs could fly. Far from escaping their chains, they feared that one day even Arda would cast them out below the physical dimension. Constant fear was as much a part of their life, as was hate and pride.

He was boastful, he, mighty among the Necros. Yet he was not his own master, and even among the second level Turannoi, the Dark Lord had appointed a hierarchy. Apophis was his immediate lord. Apophis could kill him, but never would. There was no love lost between them, and no love gained. Love was a filthy word, the kind of foul language that Usen used. He even defined himself by it.

But *useful* was a useful word. Apophis was useful to him; Set was useful to Apophis. Therefore neither tool would destroy the other. As a tool, under duress Set had even been used at times by the enemy

forces, the Philikoi, but they would never gain his soul. Did those fools believe in redemption? Helping them, they said, was grace to him. *Grace*—that was but one of their swear words. For it was the way to the Light, to Usen, where moths burnt. His kind didn't even wish to begin to tread that road. May Usen be damned if they did.

Now Set sat alert. He sensed the coming of Apophis the Serpent, and instinctively stood up. Now among the Necroi, when they are clothed in physicality, physically standing expresses an attitude of respect. But always such terms bespeak their attitudes, irrespective of their perceptual mode. He thus acknowledged his superior in rank, though not in evil. For even the lowest diabolos was no more, nor less, evil than Necuratu. All had achieved totality of darkness. They could vie with each other in strength and in scheming, but not in sin. "Hail, mighty Apophis. What does my lord require of me?"

An icy voice from the pits of death, replied: "I myself have been warned, and I come to warn thee, Lord Set. Our master is unhappy with our work in Khem. When the new stirrings of Usen were felt here, we raised up Pharaoh to put down the race we fear, even the Sheep People of Avraam, to whom he has spoken, and in whom he seems to delight as do the human vermin with their brides. Ugh, his lack of dignity is disgusting. But now, word is coming out that someone has escaped our blockade, and lies hidden in another land, far from Pharaoh's hand."

Set stirred uneasily. "My lord, such is impossible. Our prophets warned Pharaoh about new-born boys, and stirred him to exterminate them. We stirred up the Nine Bows, and unsettled Pharaoh in his dreams. He sent many to snuff out life. How then could we have failed in our duty?"

Apophis grunted. "Seemingly, Lord Set, a woman sailed her infant son under your very noses—though that was thy task to oversee. If I shall be flogged for this—and our lord is furious—be assured that I shall in turn flog thee to within an inch of thy life. You let something slip by."

Set hid his fear. "But what is the escape of one, when set against the thousands we have slain both unborn and born? Canst thou not overlook the freedom of one, when all others are the slaves of death?"

"Fool!" bellowed the Serpent. "This survivor is learnèd in the wisdom of Khem, and of the Sheep. Dost thou not see that what we must fear most, is that among them one should combine the strengths of both sides, becoming stronger than either side? Would Usen not use one who is

unique, rather than one who is but common? And how is it that this straying Sheep, a butcher of its own kind, has so far managed to elude the justice of Khem? Might not the Hand of Usen be behind such evasion of justice, justice to which he gives lip service?"

Set sat awkwardly. He knew of whom Apophis had spoken, and knew where he now dwelt. It was not that such anxieties had not already crossed his mind. It was rather that he had discouraged such thoughts, and was unwilling to shoulder the blame. There were limits to what the Necros was permitted to do to the Children. Directly slaughtering the Sheep, for instance, was definitely prohibited.

There were diabolical work-a-rounds. One might inspire one Child to kill another. Or if one Child welcomed them in as Guide Spirits, one could take the more annoying on astral day-trips, and leave them stranded, unable to reconnect soul to body. Now that was a fun game, but seldom played, since it wasn't all that easy to get new players, and it would become harder to play if players kept being killed in fun. Play was fun. Usually such fools were better kept in the House of Man, for such simpletons could play other games to amuse the diaboloi.

But this escapee, now living in hiding from Khem, well, it would be hard to put it into Pharaoh's head to send anyone there who would just happen to recognise Moysh, and would have the guts to arrest him if they did. After all, the Land of Madyan was a sanctuary land, in which Khem had neither jurisdiction nor extradition treaty. And they didn't have the ghost of a chance of getting Moysh to play with them as a medium. His mother had taught him too well, and he frankly wasn't interested in necromancy—which was a pity.

But if Usen had any untoward designs on him, it was beyond their ken. Sure the man had talent, but he was disconnected from both the Pyramid People and the Sheep People. What use is talent in the wilderness? Set just couldn't bring himself to believe that Moysh would ever amount to more than a shepherd of sheep, strayed far from human history. The two dunamoi continued for some time to bicker, but in the end it didn't come to blows. Neither wished to receive either pain or damage from thelodynamic brawlings, though where Darkness had endarkened conscience, unity could not be seen. In the end, Apophis departed in anger, and Set sat silent.

Upon the crust of the earth, totally unaware that he was the subject of such altercation, Moysh quietly went about doing his daily chores. This day his brother-in-law Hobabit—who after Ragèl's death would become his senior-in-law as head of clan—was doing priestly duties alongside his ailing father. Moysh was busy looking after the flock. His reputed rank had ended the disputes over watering rights, and he himself had forced a fair settlement. *First come first served, and no pushing out of queue.* He pulled justice, not rank.

Unbeknown to him, his people whom he neither heard nor saw, nor who knew nor remembered him, had been suffering even worse than hitherto. Inheriting his paranoia, a new pharaoh was kicking up a stink, hardening the policy of subjugating the foreigners. Many Ivrim feared their total extermination. Many among the Sheep were driven in desperation to prayer.

Then Usen heard and Usen remembered; Usen saw and Usen knew. As a shepherd he both heard and saw his sheep. He remembered that he had a covenant duty of care, and he knew their pain. But then, going through that pain was an experience which would be good for their national psyche, though admittedly wretched medicine for the generation which had to swallow it. But he saw that at last they were ready for moving on in his plan, and he knew just the man for the job. Moysh had been away from home for quite some time now, and was rather tired of seeing only the faces of his woolly sheep. It was almost the end of the seasonal pasturing for the flock. Any day now he would turn for home, hearth, and heart's delight: Zephora was waiting. He moved the flock a little closer to Mount Synaj in the Hoo-rebin region. Here there was good pasture, and a stream, and shade. It looked set to be another uneventful day, just him, his thoughts, and his sheep. Some days simply do not pan out as we expect them to.

I'm weary of doing nothing but the humdrum. At time I almost wish that I had died when I had arrived. It's not that I don't love my wife and boys here, but in Khem I dined on the flesh pots, and had my fill of bread and fish to the full. I was a somebody, not a shepherd. He turned, picked up a pebble and threw it into a scrub bush on the slopes of the mountain. He turned back to gaze upon his bleating sheep. Were they feeling anxious? He saw no cause for concern. Maybe like him they bleated to return home.

For some days he had had the company of some of his sisters-in-law. They'd helped him keep a check on these dopey sheep, before returning to update Hobabit. With their leaving, he had felt lonelier, once again marooned with these sheep. Dopey sheep! At times they seemed to have a mind of their own, stubbornly refusing to heed his voice. Oh to be back in the good old diplomatic service.

Ouch! Why, he could have sworn that that was the same pebble he had just chucked at the bush behind him. Surely the scrub bush hadn't chucked it back? Was someone hidden there, playing silly beggars with his neck? Had the girls sneaked back? He turned around and stood stock still. Had the hidden one started a fire in the bush? Of course, spontaneous combustion of bushes could happen—he'd seen that before. And yet, this fire was not doing what fire should do. Where was the smoke of burning branches? Why weren't the leaves burning? And then the bush spoke. Yes, it spoke, unless some fool hid behind, playing some prank. But a fiery prank can't be smokeless. The hairs on the back of his neck seemed to rise. If you believed that a lion was nearby, would you not feel afraid of danger? That is a fear of this world. If you believed that a ghost was nearby, would you not feel afraid of the uncanny, the intangible, of dread? That is a fear of what was once of this world. If you believed that a mighty spirit was nearby, would you not feel both wonder and shrinking, an awe, a fear of smallness? That is a fear of a mind that was never of any world.

The Voice called his name. Nay, the Flame called unto him. He had heard of paranormal experiences. Now the numinous was before him, and he began to feel faint, his feet frozen. Where was his own divinity when he needed him? "Yes, that, that is me", he stuttered all atremble, standing there in his sandalled feet, as if he stood before an equal.

The Flame spoke to him, rousing him to his disrespect. Indeed, it added, the surrounding ground was set aside unto this royal audience—should an unholy man stand upon holy ground as if common turf? Thus admonished, Moysh quickly kicked off his sandals and knelt in humble obeisance, his beating heart silenced the bleating of his sheep.

The Flame spoke again to him. It claimed to be—and Moysh dared not dispute that claim—the divinity whom Moysh's great ancestors

had worshipped, had had a covenant with. Now thoroughly afraid to see too much of the Flame, Moysh cast down his eyes, even as we might if catching unawares the sun in all his majesty. For while the latter might merely blind us, the former might easily kill us. The Flame, this partial unveiling, was perhaps short of full disclosure, for his full face would surely slay the seer. Even so, best not to look too closely. Hearing the Voice was terrifying enough. It reverberated through every fibre of his being, and he was all too pleased that he had sunk down in worship. For unsteady legs do not stand well.

The Voice affirmed its concern about Moysh's race still suffering in Khem. Indeed, it identified with that race as being its people. That seemed to be a mark of special recognition, perhaps of purpose. Had the Voice come down to liberate them from slavery? Yes. Not all slaves willy-nilly, mind you, just those of his people who were slaves. The sacrilegious thought suddenly fled unbidden past Moysh's head—*why did he ever allow the enslavement of those he could now emancipate?* The Voice simply carried on. It spoke of a plan to relocate the liberated people to the place it had promised a previous generation. *That's right*, thought Moysh, *there was an old prophecy about a promised slavery before a promised land.*

The Voice apparently had particular plans for Moysh, rather awful plans. After some years of his hiding away from Pharaoh, it wanted to send him back not merely to Khem undisguised, but to see the face of Pharaoh. Wasn't that a death warrant? He had fled from one pharaoh. That was self-indictment. What mercy could he expect from the new pharaoh?

No, that wouldn't fly. The Voice allowed him to speak. He tried to explain that, while it was a nice idea, it really wouldn't work. As Ragèl had pointed out, it would take more than one divinity to overcome those of Khem. And on the human level, Pharaoh wouldn't listen to a runaway, and nor for that matter would those of his own people.

With an inflection of a smile, the Voice offered a fulfilment sign. But they who would see deep beneath the pool must first dive in: *never fear, simply trust and obey.* It, Iahveh, would deliver his people, for the time had come when he would be to his people who he was, not merely a nominal tag for their names. Moysh must speak to them

words of hope, words of promise. He would be the voice of the Voice, and they would listen.

And as their representative, Moysh need only ask Pharaoh a small favour—to begin with. *A short holiday for them?* Surely reasonable. After all, many enslaved people were at least accorded that courtesy by Pharaoh. Was it not time for Khem to welcome Lahveh, at least as a visiting divinity? Were they not all powers together, kin from the Primeval Waters? Surely mutual welcome wasn't asking too much?

Moysh tried to coax himself into it. But Lahveh didn't give false hopes. No, he told Moysh that sweet reason would not work; that Pharaoh was too stubborn, prejudicially hardened against the Ivrim. And by the time he had finished with him, he would have made him even harder by hard lessons. But it would show others that Pharaoh alone was being insufferably unreasonable. The takeaway message to both sides, would be that Lahveh had forced fairness upon the unfair.

What Lahveh promised, was that once Pharaoh had formally rejected the win-win deal, a program of miracles would begin. Eventually, Khem would beg to give the Ivrim their backpay—in clothing, in silver, and in gold. Liberal apologies would be lavished on them, atoning for their mistreatment as slaves, and sending them on their way rejoicing. It was an accustomed way of buying off a divinity's displeasure. *Well, if that happens, thought Moysh, I'll be happy enough for them to offer apologies to our divinity, and to get into his good books. Come to think of it, that was what was prophesied to Avraam, wasn't it? But can it really happen? And must he use me?*

Aloud he simply said: "How can I get my own people alongside? Why should they believe a word I say? Will they not scorn and scoff at me as a crazy man?" Lahveh replied that miraculous signs would vouchsafe his words. His shepherd's staff would become as a snake. What a contrast between safety, and danger. His hands would be able to switch between smooth, and flaky. What a contrast between the norm, and the abnorm. He would be able to turn water from the river of life, into the blood of death. What a contrast between what is good to drink in, and bad to bleed out. Even if as dopey as docile sheep, his people would get the message.

Still Moysh tried to wheedle his way out of the job. It was an honour, sure, to be offered such an important job. Yet precisely because the job was so important, it was surely far too important to be given to a backwater shepherd. Why, he hadn't the gift of the gab, being heavy of mouth and of tongue, a slow slow speaker. You know, a golden job needed a golden tongue—right job, wrong man, and even miraculous signs can't change that. *Even divinities can get it wrong!*

Lahveh replied that he understood human strengths and weaknesses, and allowed for both. Indeed neither human speech, sight, nor hearing, were ever perfect, but he could work with whatever he found. Was it not enough that he would work with his ambassadors?

Presumably not, for Moysh tried a last ditch attempt to ditch Lahveh, to make him go away. But he was not for turning. Okay, if Moysh refused to take full credit, then let him share the credit—though that could sow seeds for future dissention. Resistance was futile, but Moysh really was ducking and weaving unreasonably.

Yet perhaps Lahveh was not taken unawares by such resistance, since he had already arranged for Moysh to shortly meet up with his older brother, Arawon, who had been born before the purges, and had turned out to be a proficient speaker. He too, without any princess to help him, had served in the diplomatic service. He had proved useful, but had eventually fallen foul of Pharaoh, and had fled.

Not much time had passed. Moysh had resigned himself to his fate, but a burden shared was a burden halved. He was thankful for small mercies. Each day, Iahveh was on his mind. A link had been forged in the backside of the wilderness, and ideas were daily rolling uninvited into his head. He wondered when he would meet up with his natural brother, but for now he would have to leave his marriage-family.

His return to Egypt was a given. Moysh tried to explain his new commission, to his father-in-law, Ragèl. As a local priest, Ragèl did not worship Moysh's divinity directly, although as he said, by honouring one you honour all. He was in fact proud that Moysh did not seek to worship his divinities, for he knew that for Moysh such polytheism would involve disloyalty to Iahveh—by dishonouring one you dishonour all, said Ragèl. And for any son-in-law to become a priest, was a high honour for Ragèl, and for all his household. So he was indeed pleased to let Moysh and his family go in peace.

The voice in his head assured Moysh that all those who had sought his life, had by then died. Having purchased donkeys enough to carry even his wife and sons—for Moysh had proved to be a skilful shepherd and amassed some wealth—they all rode together in peace. He just knew—it was a word of knowledge in his head—that he would soon meet up with his elder brother. All seemed to be smooth sailing, until their first night beyond the borders of Madyan.

For at midnight, the winds arose, and rocks from the hillsides began to slither down. Thunder was in the air. Moysh himself was narrowly missed by a falling boulder. It seemed an ill omen. Were the Powers of Darkness seeking to snuff out the Light of Usen? With sudden vision given unto her with the lighting of the sky, Zephora saw the problem: "My husband, our firstborn is not as you. You consented to our father, not to circumcise him unto your Iahveh. And that was well done. But now the tide has turned. Your divinity has called you to go in his name on a great mission. Surely your firstborn must be dedicated unto his mission. Can't you see? I fear his raging fury above. If we carry on regardless, I fear that our bones will bleach here."

"Zephora no," cried Moysh above the moaning winds, "I won't break my agreement with Ragèl our father. No, this ill fate must be of the

Darkness. For Iahveh is of the Light, and cannot complete his task without me. He is my light and salvation; I need not fear.”

But she was having none of it. Was it true what they say about women’s intuition? Are they more sensitive to the spiritual? “No”, she shouted back. “Can’t you see that he can kill you for disobedience at any time, and use this brother you’ve told me about? Who do you think you are? Mister Indispensable? Didn’t you tell me that you’d already annoyed your divinity by your beating around the bush?”

Moysh still would not budge: “No, a promise is a promise. I shall not circumcise our firstborn. Maybe this is even a test by Iahveh to see whether I can be trusted?”

“Well, if you won’t, I will”, screamed his wife, her hair flying behind her as a comet’s tail—she felt like pulling it out! The wild elements screamed about and within her head, and she was panicking. Hastily she delved into a saddle bag, and snatched out a flint knife. Moysh hadn’t promised never to let his wife circumcise their firstborn, no matter how old the lad had become. It was time to commit him to this Iahveh. His howl rose above the howling winds, but the bloody deed had been done. He would never now be a priest of Madyan.

As if by magic, the winds died away. Impressive. She bowed her proud head, grudgingly deciding she too would follow the way of the covenant. Had that threat to her husband been meant to double as an offer to her? Had Iahveh saved two silly birds with one boulder? Life would still have been good otherwise. She would have remained a wife. But now she was a wife in the same faith, and her firstborn son was transferred into that same faith. And life was better. Yet in a sense it was not a faith, but a lifestyle normally born in to, a lifeway which would surely become a living classroom. Moysh and her father both followed faith in Usen the Unknown, but their ways of worshipping him through their choice of divinities, simply differed.

For them, nothing else happened that notable night, as they peacefully slept under the calm night sky. But elsewhere, the Ruach awaked a sleeping Arawon, who was even now camped out in that same wilderness under those same stars. Let it be said that the peels of heaven often outweigh the snores of man. He had already guided Arawon into the wilderness; now it was time to rendezvous at Synaj. The sleepy man heard a voice calling him out of his thunders. “Must

I then walk in the dark?" he murmured with unmoving lips. Then more clearly he seemed to hear these words: *let they who walk in deep darkness without light, trust in the name of Iahveh and lean on him.*

He opened his eyes; his ears had been opened. He rose and gazed above into deep heaven, beholding the shining moon and mass of stars. The very sight never failed to awe him—*what is mortal man, that you care for him?* Obedient to the words, he saddled his mule, and trusted that his steps would be guided. He was an usenic man. In Khem they had offered to make him a priest, if only he would learn their magic. Such a chance—declined—came but once in a lifetime.

The next day was a joyous day, for going on his way past Mount Synaj, Moysh and his family met up with Arawon. "My brother, delighted beyond words I am to have found you at last. What cheer, my brother? For by my mule, surely you are surprised to see me here?"

"Then your mule is mine", replied Moysh with a twinkle in his eyes. Asked why not, with a smile he simply said that Elroi had told him. Arawon remembered that Elroi had been a divinity that had helped his extended family, after a big family bust up. That had been in a wilderness, many generations ago. Was this all seeing eye some wilderness divinity, whom Moysh had also met? Was he, as some speculated, Iahveh under a different guise? Moysh gave his brother time to ponder his words. Yes, he seemed to understand.

"As for cheer, there is cheer for our people, and therefore the best of cheer, my brother. For behold, Iahveh has spoken to me, and given me a message to Pharaoh. And you he has sent unto me to be even as a prophet under me." The familiar way in which Moysh had spoken down to Arawon, grated a little. In the natural order of things, Moysh had simply been a little brother, but now he spoke as if his superior. Of course, when they had met at the palace, they had had to pretend that Arawon was merely a slave in service, while Moysh was royal. As the brothers Edoma and Iakov had switched places, had Arawon and Moysh? Well, thought Arawon, *Moysh of Khem shall no longer be his name. Moysh the Mystic shall be his name now. Praised be Iahveh.*

Soon, Arawon was up to speed, having been told all that Moysh had been told, and been shown the signs which Moysh could perform. For his part, he told his little brother about his own run in with Pharaoh. His little brother had then suffered an attack of nerves, saying that

perhaps he should not return quite so soon to Khem. Wouldn't it be wiser to wait a while until things had cooled down a wee bit more? But big brother assured him that they should simply trust in the name of Iahveh and lean on him. "That," he smiled, "is just a little something I've been taught in the wilderness. Besides, if I don't support my little brother, who's going to play prophet to the prophet for our people?"

Moysh sent Zephora back to safety, then went on. The journey back was a lot quicker than the journey there, since for this leg they feared no hounds chasing scent of desert fox. Soon they passed the border posts. Having kept their robes of office, they were admitted without questioning. Indeed, Moysh could appear now as both mystic and magician in the eyes of Khem, and could stand with his brother as an ambassador to a foreign Power. He could have demanded an escort, for although Khem had enough divinities to keep her happy, she did not wish to antagonise foreign ones—why ask for trouble?

But, without pomp or ceremony they quietly returned first to their own people. Now it was of first importance that their leaders affirm them to be their representatives, and that Moysh was proclaimed as Ivri. Arawon they knew well enough. Soon, the Ivri elders were on board, and hopes were running high. They were so overjoyed to discover that Iahveh had heard their cries and really cared for them, that they bowed down in worship. The singing and dancing of the slaves alerted the slave-drivers to the fact that something seemed amiss—slaves don't party! A hasty report sped to the palace, to the counsellors on call. Zima and Umi stared at each other, transfixed.

Before many days had passed, Moysh and Arawon were ushered before mighty Pharaoh. Having claimed the right as ambassadors, Arawon spoke fluently, briefly presenting the great affliction of the Ivri people, reminding Pharaoh of the blessing they had been in the past in the saving of Khem, and requesting that they might at least have some respite days in which to—on behalf of Khem—worship Iahveh, who had sent them to Khem's rescue. Refreshed, with gladsome hearts and hands they would the better serve and praise gracious Pharaoh—on whom may Iahveh smile. His was the voice of sweet reason, with just a tinge of threat: "You must let our people go!"

Pharaoh turned to his counsellors, while Moysh, Arawon, and some elders, waited at a respectful distance. At last they were beckoned

forward. In angry tone Pharaoh demanded of them: "Who is this lord of yours? I have never heard of this Lahveh among our divinities. If this foreigner asks such favour, he asks too much of my patience."

Arawon looked ill at ease. If their divinity was not acknowledged, their status as his ambassadors would not stand, and they could be treated as runaway slaves. Would anyone link Moysh to that old manslaughter charge? They could both lose their heads, and their people might perish. Was it time for Moysh to reveal his magic? "I beseech your majesty," he begged, "our divinity simply asks for three days away. Surely that is not asking too much?" As if to underline the importance of worship, he added the idea that the entire workforce might otherwise be lost: "our divinity might kill us off otherwise!"

Zima quickly spoke a word in Pharaoh's ear: "Maybe it should be tested whether he is able to slay? Is he greater than Set the Slayer? And if he slaughters them all, we are in no wise harmed, save that we will need to replenish our stock of slaves. And if they are fulminating rebellion, is it not better if they do die? If you give way to their insolent demands, will they not adjudge you weak?" To slaughter such sheep would reduce some fears which the Kingdom of Night had, for their prophets had warned about the end of this Age, and some wondered whether the Sheep People might bring forth the dreaded Agent of Usen.

"That is a very good point, wise woman", replied Pharaoh. Then addressing Arawon once more: "You there. Get out! You are keeping useful folk from their work, wasting our time with idle talk. Tell these slackers what I have said." They were discourteously driven out of court. It seemed that Pharaoh wasn't impressed by news of Lahveh, but stopped short of needlessly offending him, whoever he was.

Umi had joked that the Ivrim must have too much time on their hands, if they thought that they could play silly buggers. As if to punish the people for their audacity, the orders went to the Khemite slave-drivers, and from them to the Ivri foremen, that the brickmakers were no longer to be supplied with straw. That meant either that the quality and quantity of their bricks would be reduced, or that they must gather their own straw, so requiring more time on the job. *Let them do that in their leisure time. That will make them think twice about begging for time off.*

In the delta, there was no real supply of stone, so bricks from mud, water, and straw, were needed for proper building. The extra time and effort they now needed to keep up their quotas, and so avoid beatings, quelled their ardour for worship time. And, since they could not very well vent their anger on Pharaoh, Moysh and Arawon bore the blunt of it. Pharaoh was amused. He sat back and chuckled: *Let this Lahveh save his prophets from his own people, if he can.*

At first this policy worked. Upset, the slave drivers beat the foremen. Upset, the foremen pleaded to know why bad had become worse, and beat the slaves. Moysh and Arawon were the bad guys. The foremen were tempted to beat them, too. They yearned for Lahveh to judge between them and their representatives.

Then Arawon and Moysh fell out. "Why did you not show Pharaoh the signs?" Arawon demanded. "It was not time", replied Moysh. *If Arawon was not to be an equal partner, perhaps Moysh should look elsewhere for help?* Moysh had been visibly shaken. Lahveh had spoken in Madyan, words both profound and simple. Powerless words? Moysh left his embittered brother, seeking a quiet place to seek Lahveh. It was a place he had gone to be alone, when he was but a youngster. It was there that he had sometimes fantasised about having some special destiny. And it was there where he now prayed.

He was brutally honest. Both Lahveh and Pharaoh had been a plague upon his people. Lahveh had not helped one jot. And now Lahveh in turn was brutally honest. Before, the Voice had called Moysh. Now, the Voice spoke fleetingly of instruction, and focused on what Lahveh had done, and now would do, for the Ivrim. In times past his people had known his sustaining power, but not his deliverance power. His long-known name of Lahveh would now be uncloaked. He would end their oppression—as promised. He would show his hand to Khem—as promised. He would become better known by the Ivrim, giving them a land to call their own—as promised. And the time had come for the second phase of operation. The best of prayers are two-way.

Heartened, Moysh returned to Pharaoh, having first gotten Arawon back onside. In answer to prayer, Lahveh had helped him regain his brother's support as a prophet. The gameplan was unfolded. Moysh himself would stand as an equal to Pharaoh. Lahveh would perform ten strikes against Khem, including a plague, before a final attack. No

longer was a mere social respite on the table. Now a complete emancipation from social slavery, and permission to leave Khem lock, stock, and barrel, was on the cards. The leaders of the Ivrim were to prepare the people—now numbering who knows, maybe fifty or sixty thousands—to leave.ⁱ It wouldn't be easy. Pharaoh's heart was already stubborn, and pushing him would doubtless make him more so: no alpha dog likes to be bested.

Again, Pharaoh had permitted an audience. Again, his magicians lined up, led by the Four Winds, his inner circle. The Four each represented one or other of the great Winds: Qebui of the North; Shehbui of the South; Henkhisesui of the East; and Hutchaiui of the West. "So," sneered Pharaoh, "you say that your divinity is ready at last to challenge the magic of Khem? In your pride you say that he can strike the River of Life? Ha, let us see your magic, and maybe then we will release your people."

For this opening salvo, Arawon took the staff of Moysh, to prove as spokesman, his power. At a nod from Moysh, he cast it onto the palace floor. "Behold, lord Pharaoh, see what was but a staff, now turned into a water snake." And so in very truth it seemed to twist and turn as the Iteru, the River of Life.

Zima and her colleagues stood forth. They had had a short adjournment, in which to make secret chants and to intone magic. Now by command of The Four, their fellow advisors, the lesser khartummim, threw down their staffs, snakes that had been frozen into a cataleptic state by cunning hand-pressure applied to the muscles of their necks. And behold, they awoke.

Zima and Umi assumed that the Staff of Arawon had itself been merely a conjuring trick, and needed not real magic to counter. That snake still moved around the floor. Of course, Zima could have extended herself in theodynamic power, and created the appearance of a live snake, but as a vampire she was under orders from her queen to obey the vampire code of nondisclosure.

"Stand still and see," shouted Arawon, "for lo my snake slays dead your snakes, and your staffs lie dead." And true enough, those snakes were writhing their last, and would never be made stiff again. Yet somehow Arawon's snake turned back into a staff, at the touch of his hand.

What kind of magic was this? Had real wood become flexible, snakelike, twisting its thorns and piercing the real snakes—swallowing their lives? If so, by what power was it so conjured? Had one life form actually changed into another, flora into fauna having for a moment a real mind of its own? But the fact that Khem appeared to match magic for magic, seemed simply to stiffen Pharaoh's resolve not to budge. He would be nobody's puppet, and the ambassadors of Lahveh were dismissed, howbeit with some show of courtesy.

Time travelled slowly in that timeless land. The mission of Moysh, moved beyond mere marvels manifested in court. Beyond the borders of Khem, Lahveh had caused torrential rain to flood the river, picking up red earth and microorganisms. A rolling surge of red death, the colour of Set, swept towards the feet of Pharaoh's palace. Unawares, he had gone down that day to the waters to bathe, when, escorted by his guards, the two Ivrim who had waited for him approached.

Vexatious to the spirit they were, but their credentials as representing both the Ivrim and Lahveh, had been verified. "Speak, and speak quickly", Pharaoh demanded. "Here I come in worship, and there you stand to oppose me? Dare you to oppose devotion to Ra?"

They bowed low in respect, but spoke boldly: "Lord Pharaoh, since you have not so far yielded in little, our divinity now orders that you yield in much. He commands that you release his chosen people, who shall worship him in the wilderness. And so that you and your people shall know him, he will strike a blow against the Land of Khem." Arawon, with the staff of Moysh, struck the waters of the Iteru.

At first, there was no change, and Pharaoh was just beginning to sneer. But troubled, upstream they looked, and behold the turbulent waters there arose, already the colour of dull blood. All sides quickly headed to higher ground, knowing how the Iteru could arise in red anger, even as sometimes she sunk in green despair, and that she could long remain in flood until pacified.

Before the day was out, her rising waters had flowed down the irrigation channels, and even into the catchment pools, as if carrying the blood of many slain. Was it the blood of the innocent babies, offered unto her, which now came back to haunt them? Had such mass slaughter of the innocents, finally made her vomit up blood? Even upon the idols of wood and of stone—their nexus to their

divinities—did the staining of toxic red algae remain, for they had poured out libations of red water in worship.

Long ago, Ipuwer the Sage had recalled how Iteru sometimes turned the colour of blood. Had the Ivrim divined through their divinity, that she was angry with Khem? Could their divinity have drawn blood from her? Coincidence, or cause? Moysh read their minds. He calmly walked upwards to where a water jar stood, fresh filled from the Iteru. Dipping a cup into it, he drew forth some clear water. Looking heavenwards, he poured the water onto the ground, and behold it turned as blood red as the river. *Will these Khemites never believe?*

Not to be outdone in principle if not in proportion, the magicians cunningly used powders to discolour clear water. *See, we too can turn water blood-red. Indeed, we too could turn Iteru into blood, yet far be it that we should defile her in such a way.* Pharaoh, with a hump, walked off with his entourage, leaving Iteru to her fate. And that fate was dire. Her infected waters spelt death to her fish. Many were their bodies, left along the banks, left to rot, a plague unto Khem.

But what was to follow? Over the months insects infected the rotting fish with disease. Frogs would be diseased, and come inland to die—all sorts of knock-on effects, spread over many months, all from the curse on Iteru. Other knocks there would be to Pharaoh's reputation of invincibility. Boy, but was he stubborn. Jahveh had promised to encourage Pharaoh to play his best game, until enough was enough. Yes, it was like a game. Let each play their best, and let all see at last who the winner is. The better the game, the better remembered.

To Moysh and to Arawon, the result seemed clear from the outset. But it had seemed clear to Pharaoh, that he would win. By the time it had ended, he would have wound through many twists and turns, from pig-headed hostility, to shaken confidence, to regained confidence, and finally to defeat and to damage limitation, and to denial and revenge, and to bitter defeat. The whole debacle was scratched from the official records—games won, not lost, were recorded in the records of Great Khem. Even when the game had gone on only a few months, at least two wiser players began to see the light.

“Umi, even we could at most match in the minor, what Arawon performs in the major, and then only for the opening few matches.”

Umi was perturbed. “Yes, I sensed even with the snake, that his power was not trickery. Then with the river reddening—telepaths upriver could have given him the timing, of course. And when he revisited—again even a vampire or a Guardian could have told him when the first wave of frogs would come forth. We too could discern the next wave.

“But this strike of gnats is surely by the hand of Usen himself, him they know simply as Lahveh—as if he is a mere power among powers. These insects we cannot simply create in size and number. Maybe at best two of giant dimension and short duration. But dare we go against the Hand of Usen? Should we reveal our true identity unto the secondborn? Should we not turn Pharaoh from his madness, and keep our places in safety here?”

It was indeed disturbing. Moysh had gotten the timing just right, and as his staff was raised over Iteru—watched by Pharaoh—a mass of infected frogs had crawled out onto land to wander witless and to die. Similarly the strange sorcerers got the timing right for the next and lesser wave—had hidden vampires of the Dawn called them forth by thelodynamics? Neither wave was welcomed by Pharaoh.

And when a month or so later the gnats, due to their bumper breeding based on bumper flooding, had started to swarm, well the lesser magicians simply packed up, went home, and sealed the doors. The Four Winds who led them, also gave way to the winged furies. Again, Moysh had gotten the timing dead right. It was as if the very dust the people walked on, turned into the perishing biters. As they said to Pharaoh, *a divinity above our power is at work.*

Had Pharaoh listened? He had not. Infected flies, infected cattle, all sorts of infections and calamities. No, he was not a man to be trusted, nor perhaps a man to be turned even by his counsellors. He suggested compromises, went this way, went that way, dither, dither, dither. Fortunately for the Ivrim, their part of the delta had not really suffered from the main flow of the Iteru. Moreover, the east wind which wreaked havoc to the centre of Khem, was not that which bothered the eastern delta much. But still, that did not mean that their enslaved oppression was less than a fleabite.

It was far worse than fleabites for the people of Khem. Infections spread through frogs and flies. And animals fell like flies throughout the land. A notable exception was where the east wind and the swarms sped not—the sheltered east delta. The people of Khem were boiling with anger, yet it seemed uncanny that the slave group threatening their land, seemed exempt from the retaliation of Ra. Could a foreign divinity wield both a sword against Khem, yet raise a shield over its own people? Had they a hidden divinity, unseen friends in high places or low? Was one both powerful and protective?

Even Pharaoh now walked warily in the face of such naked power. He offered shortterm benefits, prior to a full settlement, negotiated terms, then reneged. He tried, he really tried, but he simply couldn't bring himself to bite the bullet, to settle the issue by meeting the full demands. Each morning, within the confines of his special sleeping chamber, he told himself that it couldn't get any worse: *yes, the worst is over now.* His protective divinities smiled upon him within his walls of magic. Even when he was being washed for the day, time and time again he would repeat that mantra.

He had been dressed for the day, and had prayed his morning prayers in the adjacent temple. Now he was seated on his royal throne, ready for the business of the day. *If only the worst was over, and the morning sun shining.* The room was tense. The lesser magicians refused to challenge Moysh and Arawon anymore, and would have sued for peace. And again, Moysh stood waiting for an answer. Zima and Umi stood on the fence, simply reminding Pharaoh of the pros and cons of the available options. He wished he could be free to offer praises around the local temples—Moysh was a thorn in his side; Arawon a rod upon his back. Should he yield to them? He asked The Four.

But two of them seemed to have the knife out for the Ivrim. “Pharaoh—life, peace, and health—these people demand too much, and have cursed us too far. If you show them grace now, other slave peoples will demand as much, and leave us to be our own slaves. Will your mighty army till the land, beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks? How then will Pharaoh’s arm extend to his enemies, or protect his people from them? Will the Nine Bows not laugh at you?”

They knew that the way to get Pharaoh's goat, was to attack his pride. Was he not the earthly conduit for the powers? Even a downpour of unimaginable hail, hadn't dampened in the least his ardour for self-aggrandisement and pomp. Hail had said farewell. So too had the severe wave of locusts. Yet stubbornly the land where the Ivrim dwelt, had gotten clean away with such invasion. The conclusion seemed all but inescapable that their shepherd-divinity, Iahveh, had claimed the East Delta for his own turf, because he had claimed the people there for his own people. So clear the people by death; redeem the land.

"O mighty Pharaoh—life, peace, and health—" suggested Umi-Henkhisui pacifically, "if this Iahveh has taken from us our land, yet wishes to take from us his people, might it not be wise to let him take his people away, and so to give us back our land?"

But the opposing Winds of the North and South, repeated that to let the people go might encourage the divinities of other slave-peoples to barter liberty for land: a rule for one is a rule for all. Nay, by overcoming one divinity and overcoming its people, a strong message would be sent to other immigrant divinities, that when in Khem they must bow to Ra. Pharaoh's policy was to comply whenever the Four Winds united, but when they divided, to determine his own policy. He was annoyed that The Four were divided.

"Umi," flagged up Zima telepathically, "beware, evil is before you. Let us not fall into Pharaoh's bad books."

"Zima," was his silent reply, "you at least must not. For the two Winds who oppose the Ivrim, will not forgo their hatred. I sense that the diaboloi have some pact with them. Therefore, unanimity of the Winds is unlikely, unless we too oppose the Ivrim. And to oppose them is to oppose Iahveh, and is that prudent? But if I do fall into Pharaoh's disfavour, if you remain in his favour you can protect me."

"It is well thought", she replied. "I shall do as you bid, and remain in his good books if I can." They stood silently looking mind to mind; no bystander heard their telepathic talk. And as they stood, Pharaoh vacillated, waxing hot and cold. Still he suggested compromises, threatened, listened, and shut his ears. Maybe all their adults could have a short vacation—he said—okay, throw in their children, but leaving their cattle and flocks behind as pledge of their return. *I'm a reasonable man*—he said—but they demand too much of me.

Yet Moysh was not for turning. If his first demand had been a short vacation, even that had had to be full and free, and their word to return, their only bond. The demand had deepened. Now Pharaoh almost forgot his dignity, almost jumped from his throne to whip them out of his palace personally—"if I see you again," he screeched at them, "I, I'll kill you with my own bare hands." His stupidity left all of Khem in the dark, for the light of glorious Ra had fallen silent.

Iahveh ratcheted up his judgments upon Khem, a policy he would later use with his people, where blessings would become better the more loyal they were, and punishments would become worse the more disloyal they were. Yes, the worse you were, the worse it would become for you; conversely the better you were, the better it would become for you—all other things being equal, that is.

This time, Iahveh underlined a policy that the firstborn should be dedicated to him, a Firstfruits, in token of all things being his. Khem would detect that he was above all their divinities. Now at that stage that was an idea beyond even his own people. It could be glimpsed, but it could not be fully grasped: all may touch the earth, but who can fully embrace Earth? But the better part of his own people, could at least fully grasp that all of them belonged to him by covenant, though few said, by creation.

Khem understood even less. But one thing that Khem could see, was that the Ivrim's divinity could outmaster their chief divinity, Ra. Must they tolerate the intolerable? Must they believe the impossible, possible? Could a dog that couldn't ever not catch, catch a fox that couldn't ever be caught? Could an all-piercing spear, not pierce an impierceable shield? They shut their eyes; stopped their ears.

Yet the tokens of Iahveh's power had already been seen, and that was undeniable. Now Iahveh threatened to take their firstborn sons, through death to himself for judgement. And Moysh and Arawon again visited Pharaoh, and delivered this chilling threat. Pharaoh didn't dare kill them. He merely growled and glowered, not even giving an articulate answer. He was culpably responsible for his irresponsibility, and the ambassadors of the Ivrim turned their backs on him in disgust, and stormed out.

“My lord Pharaoh,” pleaded Umi, “Moysh has this time stormed away in anger, having threatened the successor to your throne. Would you chance your firstborn son and heir? Even we your loyal magicians have long given up this fight.”

Umi didn’t know quite why he was pleading. Certainly he would have been disgusted with the base accusation that he actually cared for the firstborn of the vermin of Khem. Had he dwelt with the vermin so long, that they were now as pets? Perhaps he would have argued—among his own kind—that he merely wished to preserve the status quo. Or that he pretended to care, to preserve his cover. Or perhaps that he was so disgusted by the follies of such blind vermin, that for the sake of sanity he really did wish to give some sensible advice. How many crave to correct such blithering idiots? But you know, even if you beat a fool half to death, you still can’t beat the foolishness out of the surviving half, so isn’t it foolish to try?

Umi didn’t realise, but even Zima wondered what had gotten into his head. For the sake of their convenience, so long as they remained in their posts post-crisis, why not simply rubber-stamp Pharaoh? Why be concerned about slaves, especially slaves of Usen? But if Umi was touched with real concern for them, Zima might just have to kill him—or at least hand him over to Lilith. Lilith had teeth.

But if she should try to kill him without involving the queen, how best should it be done? It would not do to gang up with the other two Winds for a judicial execution. Umi might blab, might let something out of the bag. Besides, she herself might be viewed with suspicion, and have to flee from Khem, which would be a nuisance.

While she quickly considered the situation, the human fool was also considering it. “Fool!” shouted Pharaoh. “Because you lack enough magic, do you suppose that I, being semidivine, cannot withstand the power of a foreign divinity of a slave people? Begone from my sight, you who have given up the fight. My own right hand will give me the victory.” Umi bowed low and departed quickly. Honestly, he wondered why he had spoken on behalf of the secondborn. Was he going soft? Fie!

Moysh had stormed away from Pharaoh, who simply had not been listening for a long time. But anger against Pharaoh was an almost unforgiveable sin. Pharaoh might storm away from you, that was his right and you were supposed to tremble. But to storm away from him,

as if he was your slave, why, that was unprecedeted, unparalleled, preposterous. Yet even Pharaoh's guards did not know what to do. Should they chase after and arrest the rebels?

Dangerous! Such rebels! But the guards were not mere flesh and blood. They were husbands and fathers. Their own eldest sons were now at risk. Would arrest and punishment of the perpetrators, not turn bad to worse? That Iahveh of theirs was too terrible to mess with. Nah, best leave those two be, unless Pharaoh gave a clear order. And at present he seemed incapable of fighting with the outside world, being too busy fighting with the East Wind.

And the East Wind was deadly. Why, in their infancy the guards had heard the old wives' tale about how once upon a time—a time long ago forgotten in detail—a warning had come to the land in a dream. In that dream, seven years of good wheat would be forgotten by seven years of East Wind scorching the crops. That tale had told about some friendly foreigners who had stockpiled food from abundant years, thus saving Khem from the great famine which followed. But the foreigners nowadays were far from friendly, and perhaps controlled the East Wind. Anyway, the impertinence of Moysh and Arawon was forgotten about, and Pharaoh went to lie down, then maybe to summon Ra, or maybe set Set onto them.

Moysh and Arawon returned to their people. The fearful of the palace spread the foreboding of death. Some pleaded that restitution be made to the Ivrim, begging them to leave lest Khem should die. Some asked why Pharaoh—on whom may the two powerful ones, the *sekhemti*, always rest—didn't just whip that people out, not just from the palace, but from Khem? The Four Winds were at variance, it was said, and the loyalty of the East Wind was questioned. Were the Guardians thus divided, keeping well out of it?

Moysh, much on his mind, failed to spot the eye in the sky, a small dark shadow watching him. At last Moysh stopped, and Umi as a bat fluttered down silently into a withered tree. He was curious about what plans were afoot in the enemy camp. None of Pharaoh's guards or slave-masters now dared to oversee these people, so no official news would trickle back to Pharaoh. Fearlessly Moysh assembled the Ivri elders. Then he stood up to speak.

“Behold, Lahveh is about to do a new thing, and we must be ready when he acts. Too long now have we his people lacked festival. Now, I tell you, a new festival shall begin, a festival of release into freedom and into abundance and land. This month—Lahveh says—is to be our first month from this time forth, as long as we shall be his people. And in this month we are to celebrate each year, beginning on the full moon of the fifteenth. Now therefore, before we set forth, let us look to our family households, and therein let us celebrate with festive joy. But know that in times to come, we shall celebrate as a nation. For such is his plan for us. I shall write down more fully his commands.

“But for now, we and those who have turned to Lahveh and now shelter within our faith, must prepare in faith to go forth like the wind. For on the fourteenth of this moon, we must slay healthy looking lambs and kids, one each for a household or two. Be careful not to break any of their sacrificial bones. And at the going down of the sun, as the next day dawns, we shall thus each eat a hearty feast, and celebrate that our captivity draws near to its end.

“If any man or boy be uncircumcised, let them not partake. And if any believe this faith is vain, let them not partake. But let those who partake in covenant, daub their doorways with sacrificial blood. For Lahveh will send death upon the land, to all households in Khem which have a firstborn son. Yet where our faith is shown by blood, death will pass over, and we who dwell within will be spared.”

Umi continued to earwig. Much more did Moysh say, giving details for this faith-fest. Strange details, thought Umi. Why, for instance, burn any leftover meat, especially if beginning a long journey? The secondborn, after all, needed food frequently. He understood—but did not approve of—the idea of sacredness, but the ceremony seemed to carry the triple ideas of sustenance, symbolism, and sacredness. But why should something simple like symbolism, trump what the body needs? And why live for days with the intended victim? Was it to give it a few last days of pleasure? Maybe to feel at one with it? Rum creatures, the race of man.

There was also talk about combining the meat with bread—unleavened bread, not what one called tasty. Bread was a basic substance for these people. Yet they were to be deprived of the luxury of yeast to flavour it. It seemed to be something to do with the symbolism of haste, as if hastily prepared bread for a hasty way out

from slavery. Again, symbolism seemed to trump pleasure, even for a celebratory meal. And they were to be dressed for outdoors, though the celebrations would be indoors. Little sleep would they get for the night, if preparing for freedom, not slavery, for the morning.

The commands were wrapped in the idea, that henceforth the redeemed would soon begin to look back yearly to that pivot of redemption. The details for later times varied from the first instructions, but maybe that was part of the symbolism, to underline that the event could never ever be reduplicated? Each year a whole week was to be devoted to this remembrance.

Seemingly Usen was going to demand an account from the Powers of Khem, reining in any Turannoi who had exceeded their permissions, and fine-tuning the Guardians as to their parts to play in his plans for the Ivrim. In short, he apparently promised to put both sides in their place, so that his plans would run without a hitch. He certainly had exciting times lined up for the Ivrim, which would annoy the Kingdom of Necros. Khem too would hate the exodus of something like 60,000 *gēbārîm*, adult slaves both men and women. Khem would hate even more, the keeping of them: why cling on to a scorpion? How would such news impact his own people? Umi felt troubled.

Moysh had finished. The leaders of the Ivrim all bowed down low in worship. By that token, they accepted Moysh as their leader, and Iahveh as his leader. And the leader of their leader suddenly seemed close, too close for comfort. And though something within said that remaining was safe enough, quickly Umi arose and flew away. He knew Usen to be hostile not just to the Necros. The Night was also in the Kingdom of Darkness, a common opposition against his tyranny towards them. Closeness was uncomfortable, unnatural, unwise.

But the feeling among the people of Khem—in general—was much worse than for Umi. For later that night death stalked their homes. Some had in superstition, as if an apotropaic, daubed their doorways with sacrificial blood. Having heard the word, they went through the motions. They too were spared. For that night, obeying the letter without the spirit, sufficed. They had, against certain ridicule, at least nominally affirmed this foreign Power. But to those who had really believed, it was as if the blood had consecrated them unto Iahveh.

At midnight after the feast, the slaughter had begun. Black dogs howled through the long night, as firstborn boys, firstborn husbands, and firstborn grandfathers, were simply stuck down. As the dawn broke, the cries of his people came unto Pharaoh. Why had he allowed a foreign divinity to wreak havoc upon Khem? Was he not a semidivinity, standing as their mediator before all the Philikoi of Khem? Had he fallen out with them? Did he need to repent before them and set things right?

Long before noon, he had left his throne to lament. But he did not lament for his people's lament. No, for his own lament drowned out all other wailing voices. For in the night, his precious firstborn son had succumbed meekly to death. But should the records state that his death was due to some foreign Power? Nay, he must staunch his tears. Better to scratch the lad from the records, than to record defeat. His next born son would become his firstborn son, lest the power of the throne be undermined.

Blamed by his people, he in turn turned in blame to his magicians. "You Four Winds are at fault. For not only have you been unable to triumph over Arawon and over Moysh, but your spells have not protected the Palace. The prince lies dead; his blood is on your heads! Nor have you advised me with the unequivocal voice of Shu. Are you not to speak with one counsel, when I have need of it? If Apophis has dimmed my sight—and who else but he could do so?—you at least should have divined the mind of glorious Ra. Or have you turned to Apophis, that you conspire to speak confusion, and cloud my sight from the shining one? Have you entered into his Dark kingdom, and become unto me as enemies?"

Now death in the day sailed close to the Four Winds, for Pharaoh's guards gripped their weapons tightly. For if these four, who claimed to be the ambassadors of the Guardian Winds, had turned to the Dark, then they must be given unto death, and that speedily. Of those four, Umi and Zima were safe enough, though to escape by flight would have brought the rebuke of Lilith upon them. It was as if they now stood between the devil and the deep blue sea, but at least at sea they could survive. "Your majesty," pleaded Umi with arms outstretched and hands upwards beseechingly, "did I not beseech you to consider giving way, and sending them forth with your blessings, they

who came in to bless us? And thus by grace to regain the land to house a weaker people?"

"What, miscreant," spat Pharaoh, "you throw again in my face your earlier folly? I warned you then, as I warn you now. Had you spoken by Ra, why had the other Winds not spoken likewise? Why have you four spoken with divided voice? I shall not spare any Wind, if my judgements fall upon the Winds. And so it shall fall, unless you now all speak with one voice, the Voice of Shu, even the Voice of Ra who is over all. Speak, therefore, my honoured magicians—but if you fail once more, you shall fail no more."

Pharaoh was not open to sweet reason. He simply sought a united position, whether sincere or insincere. Yes, just let someone else decide for him what to do. Where foreign divinities were involved, even the Grand Vizier deferred to The Four. Now therefore the voice of fear spoke to all the Winds: *if one dissent, all die*. Following a nod from Umi and Zima, the North and South Winds, though diabolically detesting the Ivrim, nevertheless with one voice spoke a word of blessing, spoke for the Ivrim's wellbeing. For what they had to say seemed inescapably simple now: "Let the people go!" Umi and Zima breathed an inaudible sigh of relief. At last they could all speak the same word: "Let this people go, lock, stock, and barrel."

And so Pharaoh decided. No longer talk about who if any among the people may go, or whether all—except their livestock left as security. No, cut your losses, boot them out—with dignity. And the sooner the better. Hurry now. Orders were immediately sent out to Moyshe: "Get out, all of you, take all you have had and have now gained. Our people have more than handsomely paid you your dues—and what have they gained but death and destruction? So what more can you demand?

"Go now in peace, only go swiftly, lest the vengeance of our people arise against you, who have given them grievance. And in justice beg your divinity, that he shall bless our people, for shall not his blessing counter his curse, and so restore us to normal life? Let us be left in peace."

She had been lovely in his eyes, his first love, but far above him—or so it had seemed to humble eyes of love. She had once asked him if he wished to kiss her. He had asked of his veridicous mind, not of his vernal heart, and said No. No, he had been shy of girls. Whether or not she had been offering him a chance, he would probably never know. What if he had said Yes? Might they have married? Well, Iacoba was now but a sweet sigh, a nostalgic evening breeze from yesteryear—may Usen bless and protect her. Separate journeys.

As for him, he was now older, a bit wiser, but still single—would he always be? *Snap out of it, man. One cannot live on memories.* No, this day he must be busy. His father Nunit had given him an important part in the big move. It would take hours to begin their mass exodus. Yes, I'hoshua, as he was nicknamed for his zeal for their divinity and his lack of self-trust, saw how things stood, and Moysh had a special eye on him, as someone to be trusted in high matters. Arawon had known Nunit, his father, well. The general logistics had been roughly worked out by leadership over a number of months, ever since Moysh had shown that Lahveh's power meant business.

Organisation was key. The people had tribal leaders, and then each tribe divided into clans, and then into extended families, then into households. With Khem in such confusion, the order of the day was exceptional. Today no one was going off to serve Khem; no one was having time for the morning baking of bread. Today, people just stayed together in their ever enlarging groups, milling around, chatting. Many stewards were mingling, asking questions about who belonged to such and such a clan, *and didn't you know you were supposed to be at the other side of town?*

But some people were hardly able to walk, yet alone to work. They would have to be carried or carted. Still, they were a far better burden than what a day's slavery would have been. The people were awash with excitement, but was it all too good to be true? After the sweat of the day, would they wake up in a nightmare? Some were busy pondering that conundrum; most were getting on with life as it was. Some women were busy tidying up their hovels before leaving; some

men were busy hustling their wives out of their hovels—*leave it; but just a few things to tidy; just leave it.* Wives and husbands were both busy keeping their children happy and safe—the poor mites would soon enough be too tired to run and play. So children were just busy enjoying life—for once.

Yet soon arrangements to depart were satisfactorily sorted, and the whole assembly set off on its epic journey. Slowly they trekked on, heading east to the border. And as the sun faltered, with a sense of satisfaction they camped close by the boundary to the wilderness. From breakfast to bed had been historic.

Later that night I'hoshua was patrolling the eastern side of the camp. The Khem border patrol had had word that the Ivri people had a let-pass from the palace, and Moysh had sent a messenger to the fort to check that all was well. But I'hoshua wished to begin the way that they would have to go, for they would certainly meet with hostility along the way. Best keep their guard up. Besides, early in the night Lahveh had spoken thus with Moysh, and Moysh to I'hoshua.

And so he went to join the watch. “Is that you, I'hoshua?” It was the cheery voice of his old friend Kalev, which spoke to him. Kalev like himself, was a survivor from the brickfields. Kalev was a grafter and a born leader, unofficially and officially.

Kalev had blood in his veins from a people who lived in the very land to which they were now headed, Chenán. But that was not a problem. He was an alright kind of bloke, as straight as they come, and totally committed to his Ivri identity, though some still rubbed in his foreign roots. He'd fight if needed, but diplomacy might be enough to live alongside those other people. In fact, quite a few foreign roots were travelling with the Ivrim, seeking new soil in which to plant themselves. Admittedly, most were probably using the Ivrim more to lose Khem, than to gain Lahveh. Kalev put Lahveh first.

I'hoshua raised his torch to his face, so that Kalev could indeed recognise him. “Greetings, Kalev. I'm pleased to see you watchful over the flock”, he replied, holding then his arms wide apart, inviting a friendly buddy-hug.

Kalev took the offered hug as a proven comrade. "Flock?" chuckled Kalev with a smile. "Well brother-sheep, do you think that the wolves may attack tonight?"

I'hoshua smiled. "Not tonight, I think, though we must be wary. Indeed my lord Moysh has this night heard from Lahveh. It seems that Pharaoh is discussing when and where to attack, and whether it is safer to wait until we are far from his borders. Perhaps he hopes that if we are slain or captured without, that having once left the Land of Khem, our divine defender will be unable to re-enter, and will become merely an impotent spirit of the wilderness. Some have told him that because we came freely in, we must freely leave, but then may be freely attacked.

"Be that as it may, the word is that Lahveh will encourage Pharaoh to take his bold steps sooner rather than later. My lord Moysh only guesses, perhaps, as to the why, but what he was told was that at the rising of the sun, we must veer back into Khem. Such dithering will give, I guess, the impression that we are unsure about where to go and what to do. And perhaps that we fear to chance his border forts to the east, and think to sneak away by the western, or even the southern, routes."

"What?" exclaimed Kalev, "Are we then to provoke the wolf to attack the sheep? Well, I guess that that could be better than awaiting a pack of jackals to come anytime among the lambs. I do wish that we were not as weaponless as sheep before shearers. All this Pharaoh the Wolf knows. If he sends out a small force, thinking for a quick and easy kill, perhaps our farming tools might suffice to smite the old wolf hard on his nose. Still, let us pray that our leader—and I do not mean Moysh, heaven bless him—will stand still and fight for us. After what he has already done, I reckon that I trust him more than the arm of flesh, anyhow."

The two friends stood silently side by side, peering out into the dark, looking at the well-lit fort to the east, knowing that many far from friendly eyes were watching them from its dark walls. But from what Moysh had just said, it seemed that for now the fort would let them pass in peace. Only thing was, now it seemed they didn't wish to pass in peace, but wished to hang around as helpless bait.

The following day they were gone. The fort sped a report to the palace, that those permitted to leave had actually fled deeper into Khem. "Four Winds, harken unto me," Pharaoh demanded, "and

declare to me your mind. Should I chase after these slaves and take or slay them now, or sit back and allow them to witless wander our land?"

Shehbui of the South stood forth. "Lord Pharaoh, I who speak as the Voice of Shehbui say go forth and conquer. For behold, he who worked magic on their behalf, has left them witless. Doubt not that they have offended him, even on the borders of our land. Therefore they shall be easy prey, and having deserted them, will he desire them back?"

Qebui of the North then drew near. "Lord Pharaoh, as the South has declared, so too does the North agree. For would it not shame us to leave such sheep to graze off the land willy-nilly, if we do not at least shear them? Let us therefore bring them back into our fold, and punish them for their insolence."

Hutchaiui of the West then addressed mighty Pharaoh. "Lord Pharaoh, hear now from the West. The news the West brings to me is of victory, when the people of Khem shall regain their slaves and their wealth stolen in short-lived victory. For surely these people are now defenceless and rudderless. Only attack swiftly, lest they turn again east. If by his folly their divinity has gone that way to await for them there, are they not defenceless? If by their own folly they have turned from him and from escape, will he not abandon them to their fate?"

"And you Henkhisesui, who speak as the East Wind, what say you?" demanded Pharaoh menacingly. This Wind alone had betrayed him before. "Should we not regain that which was lost, or shall we sit as the fearful, and let this wandering people devour our land at will?"

"Umi, be careful how you speak", warned Zima telepathically—for he hesitated. "What should be done is clear to all. Let it be clear to you. Regain now the favour of Pharaoh, who though a fool is a fool to whom it is wise to please with folly. Nor should we anger our queen."

It is said that they who hesitate are lost, especially when they hesitate between what they believe, and what they believe they must believe. But Umi was far from convinced that Usen had abandoned, or been abandoned by, his people. He well knew that Usen could have delivered his people well before now, had he chosen merely to do so. The series of interventions seemed to him to have a bigger purpose, revealing himself both to Khem and to the Sheep. Might this seeming hiccup, be a trap? Would he show that he could deliver them even from direct attack? And if that were to happen, neither he nor Zima

would be safe from exposure, for having lied to Pharaoh. But Pharaoh was waiting, and would not wait much longer.

“Lord Pharaoh, forgive I pray my delay. It was that before me I saw a vision of mighty victory, with the heads of Moysh and of Arawon in baskets before you. An offering moreover from their own people, with their arms outstretched in supplication for your clemency. Be assured that your victory will signal to slaves of all peoples, never to depart from the Yoke of Pharaoh. Moreover, the Nine Bows too shall see the Arm of Pharaoh, and their knees shall melt like wax. Life, health, and strength be to you, O pharaoh of Khem.”

There, he had done it, he had spoken what was sought from him. He had not seen any such thing, but it had pleased Pharaoh to hear that he had. If the attack was a success, well, Pharaoh would overlook any variation of the vision. Indeed Umi and Zima could enter into the camp of the Ivrim, and bring about their defeat. It would be easy. They could impersonate Moysh and Arawon, giving orders to surrender, dividing the camp.

Or they could simply control them both. For vampires can inject their DNA into the Children of Usen, thereby establishing mind control. And after issuing the command to surrender, they could then cause the dispirited Sheep to kill their two Shepherds, and to offer Pharaoh their heads on platters. What more natural revenge upon the two who had led them through grief into a feeble and fleeting freedom? It would be easy—unless Usen was hidden within his flock.

Zima seemed to read his mind. “Umi, let us leave events to Pharaoh—damage, despair, and death, be his. We do not need to commit directly against the Sheep. Let the secondborn fight their own battles. If Usen is not with them, the Sheep will be recaptured or butchered by Pharaoh. If he is with them, it is better for us to keep aloof from the battle. Behind the North and South Winds, I sense the Necroi. We are not of them. Let them alone face Usen’s fury. And if beyond belief the Sheep smite the Wolf, we ourselves might be safer hidden within that flock. And from within, could we not discern the designs of Usen? Could we not better oppose the Seventh Age, lest it come to pass?”

Ah, she was a smart one, she was. Already she had laid a contingency plan, and one which somehow appealed to Umi more than he hoped she realised. Yes, stealth and guile might be the better part of

valour—it was ever the case with the vampires on this silent planet. He and she had been with the pharaohs before ever pyramid was built, those meaningless lumps of stone devoted to pride and to hope and to a deficient aioniology.

And he knew that she was ever ready to depart from such servitude. It had been amusing, but the game was becoming rather tiresome. To actually work for the Night within the Ivrim, well, that could be both ironic and highly rewarding. And if they joined as peacemakers, it would certainly be a darn sight safer, too. Yes, she was a smart one. Yet he might have to kill her.

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Pharaoh, becoming unbecomingly gay, cheerfully called forth his charioteers. He himself would in pride lead them into battle. Pshaw, hardly a week had gone by, and already the motley Sheep were shepherdless, ready for the slaughter, standing around the border canal system which joined two great lakes, having headed north towards a military zone—now grazing, clueless, hopeless. With a little luck, they would meekly surrender at the first sign of force. With a little bit more luck, they would resist, and invite a blood-letting.

Quickly his host of 600 chariots were prepared and manned. He reckoned the odds. It would be about one chariot to each hundred sheep—the lambs of the flock counted not. And such sheep—weaponless and untrained in battle. He was actually in two minds as to halving his force. *But why should not all of my charioteers see my victory over the Ivrim, those ne'er-do-well bleaters who have plagued my kingdom? Why not let each charioteer taste my sweet revenge?*

Indeed, many in his army yearned for blood—and women—but foot soldiers could not join the battle before it was all over. It was pointless calling on them. Besides, there might be more need to guard the palace while he was away, for some of his people blamed him for Khem's rather unfortunate series of events. No, to mop up the enemy, the speed of horses was needed, for the Ivrim might turn southeast and cross into the wilderness, if given too much time to think.

“O Four Winds of Ra!” commanded Pharaoh in a loud voice. “Behold, I ride forth to bring these wayward sheep back into my pen, and we shall

feast on fat mutton, before we return in victory. Guard well my throne, while we are gone. To you I commit the palace guards."

"O Pharaoh," they replied as if one voice, "life, health, and strength, be to you. Success shall and must be yours while this world endures. As you have decreed, so shall we do." As if one body, they bowed low at the feet of Pharaoh. The guards clashed their swords against their shields. "Long life to Pharaoh!" they cried, as he mounted his chariot, from there to lead his chariots of fire. Truly, it was a glorious sight.

Long long they rode, seeking their prey. That day. The next. Until at last they came across the Sheep, cowering with their backs to the inland sea, even the water-chain of reeds which none could cross. For boats could not navigate the reeds, and the depth would drown any brave but foolish soul who tried to wade such waters.

But had the water levels gone down? Pharaoh recollected that this section of the canal linking the lakes, had been damned away to the south, while work was being done to deepen it to improve the perimeter defence. Still, escape that way still seemed impossible, even if the Sheep knew of the submerged causeways.

Stranded, they were going nowhere fast. Should the silly sheep decide to fight, why that was sheer folly, but to butcher a few mavericks would be quite enjoyable, really. Indeed as Pharaoh beheld them cowering before his task force, he was minded to destroy them all anyway, and leave their bodies to rot in the reeds. For had they not caused his people great lament? Why offer them the kindness of slavery? As he looked out, the monarch of all he surveyed, the sight before him was delicious. Ah, let them cower before him. If they chose not to attack him, they could jolly well await his onslaught at his convenience. "Men, we camp here, and attack at dawn!" He shouted out. "Long life to Pharaoh!" they shouted back.

As they began to encamp, fear multiplied among the camp of the Ivrim. Moysh feared the threat of his own people, more than the host of chariots which camped on the horizon at a respectful distance. I'hoshua had left him to minister in the camp, but leaders were coming up to him. Some spat in fury. Some shook their fists at him. Some dropped to their knees and begged for mercy. Some tried to reason with him. But the message of all seemed easy enough to put

into words: *Are you working for Pharaoh? Is this his way to bury our bodies far from the madding crowd? Didn't we beg you not to stir up trouble for us, and just to let us be? Isn't slavery better than death?*

Moysh wept, but he also called upon Lahveh. For all the charges brought against him, he himself had previously pondered. Why had Lahveh insisted on this course of action? But then, Moysh remembered the tears of a different sort which the elders had cried, when they had learnt that Lahveh had heard them and cared for them. To them he pleaded, "Fear not! Stand still! Lahveh saves!" The murmurings did not subside. Easy answers to complex questions? It won't wash, Moysh. Above the clamour of his people, Moysh sought to hear the voice of calm above the fracas. He looked above: "Lahveh, speak, your servant is listening."

And to the mind of Moysh, came as it were words from above, words which stung him to the quick. For, after all he had done for Lahveh and at great personal risk, it hurt that the Voice spoke to him in rebuke. The Voice showed him that he, Moysh, was the problem, not the solution. For had he not in hand all he needed to rescue his own people, yet stood stock still as if awaiting slaughter? He himself was holding up they who should move on.

Yes, it suddenly seemed as simple as holding up his staff. That staff had invoked miracles. Did he not hold a miracle in his hand? Why, it itched to invoke another miracle—for was anything too hard for Lahveh? Moysh instantly saw that all he needed to do was to turn the key in faith, and Lahveh would open the door. Yes, he must hold out the staff over this sea of reeds, and the Mouth of Hiroth would open up before them.

With paranormal vision, he saw the lake bed caked firm, her waters subsided. He saw the reed bed flattened before a fiery sandstorm laden wind from the east. All of this came into the mind's eye of Moysh—what some mystics call the third eye—as he silently stood on the shore surrounded by an inner sea of calm. Was not their cloth of danger woven to reveal Lahveh's power and Moysh's authority?

He bowed his head in shame and surrender, and smiled: "It shall be, lord, as you command." He felt in turn the kiss of a peace that passed

all human comprehension. His soul was still; his heart was slowed; his anxiety was slain. No more he doubted his lord.

He realised that sometimes he himself needed only to use keys which his lord had already given—why ask for what has been given? And he guessed that if a door was deadly, then Lahveh would redirect him, perhaps by mystic vision or clairaudience. *And is that not a truth of life*, he mused, *that while we have his general aim and vision, he can step in to tell us where not to go and where to go; to tell us what not to do and what to do?*

His people quieted. In faith he stretched forth his hand, and the dry east wind did blow. He looked back to defy his enemy, but behold, a heavy dark cloud had descended between he and they, a wall of deep darkness shutting out the light of Pharaoh. Yet a light now descended upon the Ivrim, outshining the sun in his noonday glory. Moysh stood in awe. And Pharaoh, peering into the uncanny gloom, feared that Apophis, arch enemy of Ra's liberating light, had arisen to defend the dastardly Ivrim, for the impenetrable cloud had blotted out Ra.

But Pharaoh was wise. He knew that night would soon fall, the witching hours when none should challenge the might of Apophis. For with the setting of the sun, the Mesektet Boat of Ra would begin its nightly journey through the Twelve Gates of the night, and would overthrow Apophis by dawn. Grimly he laughed, for after the darkness would come a red morn of wrath; his swords would slice through his slaves; he would butcher his sheep.

And so both camps rested—one in the deep dark of night; one in the fiery light as of day. To both came the sweet comfort of Morpheus, and whispers of doom. For all at least except Moysh, who long sat at the shoreline, feeling the warm winds, gradually hearing a change in the sound of the reeds.

In uncanny light the imagination can play tricks. It almost seemed as if the water level was dropping, and that the canal bed was beginning to emerge, as a submerged bridge. But was the water draining away? His eyes were surely playing tricks. Why, he saw bodies floating in the water, human and equine bodies. Pharaoh came up to him, and said, "I know not Lahveh, that I should let your people go, but why has

he drowned my charioteers, just because we wanted to slaughter all you sheep? It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not..."

Moysh awoke with a start, roughly shaken by I'hoshua and his friend. Who was his friend? Oh yes, Kalev, the butt of some questionable jokes, wasn't he? "What's the matter, I'hoshua? Is there trouble afoot?" Quickly he got to his feet.

"No, my lord Moysh, at least not for us, I think. But look, the Yamsuf Canal has changed. The wind has opened up a way of escape into the wilderness. See for yourself." Under the shining guardians of the night, Moysh guarded his eyes from the softly shining sand and looked amazed. Yes, as his mind cleared, it all came back. Lahveh had promised a path, and there it was, new laid and glowing dull, surrounded by moon-silver in which the bright stars of deep heaven sparkled as jewels of the sky.

For in the waking world, the water levels had receded. Before them on the east there now stood a wide road, carpeted over its mud by wind-beaten reeds. Yes, it was bound to support them, for the road had been laid for them. To either side was a surrounding wall of low-lying water, stretching so far as the moonlit eye could see.

"Up!" shouted Moysh, "Up! Let horns be sounded. Behold, the bank of dark shadow and fire remains between us and Pharaoh. Surely he will not dare follow while our shield remains firm. But let us not put Lahveh to the test. Let us go swiftly, following our guide."

Funny, the same horns their foremen had used to summon them to work, they now used to summon them to walk. And another change: all were now desirous to obey their leader without demur. Quickly they arose and went forward in tribal order. At the new road, they stopped in justifiable hesitation, but I'hoshua and Kalev quickly ran down the embankment and ran forward on the rushes.

It stank, but it stayed firm under their weight. The people quickly followed. Funny, Khem believed that a field of reeds—a *Sekhet A'Aru*—would meet the righteous after death. Here a path of reeds met the people of Lahveh before death, offering a way to life. *What's good for the Sheep is good for the Wolf*, some muttered, but they kept that thought to themselves.

Pharaoh was awoken by the horns of the Sheep. What was going on? The ominous wall of fiery darkness was still there, impassible until Ra awoke and put his enemy to flight. But what was going on? He sent spies to venture the dark wall. Quickly they obeyed—as they valued their lives. Quickly they returned, informing Pharaoh that the Sheep had begun to cross the Yamsuf Canal.

Pharaoh bellowed in frustrated rage: "Woe! Do the dam builders fight for them in the south? Does the servant of Apophis swallow the waters, that our enemies may escape in darkness? Quickly. Arise, mount your chariots. Apophis may endure for a night, but Ra comes in the morning. We will strike the heels of the Sheep. Quickly, forward."

And so the mighty host swung into action. Battle was their cry; blood their reward. At the banks, his commander begged Pharaoh to stand on the shore, commanding his horses, his chariots, and his men, to adventure the reed way. For, said he, it was not fit that Pharaoh—long life to him—should lead butchers to the slaughter, as if to an army. In that fell light, Pharaoh masked his fear and nodded. But until dawn, they could not expect aid from Ra. Gladly he heeded his commander of chariots, and dressed fear in dignity.

And thus the chariots drove in waves within the waters, damned to the south and subdued by the driving desert wind. Putting trepidation aside, it was do or die. And almost it seemed that they would do and would not die. For as the dawn, the further shoreline drew near, even as the last of the Sheep scrambled forth in safety.

Then did they raise a battle cry. But the cry died on their lips, for they noticed that the path was wetter, and the water level higher to their right. Had the workmen arisen early to finish their task, and to reflood the canal? Had word from the palace warned the engineers that this escape route must be cut off? No, by Ra, No! Please No.

First one, then another of the chariot wheels, slipped, veered. One chariot collided into another at its side. Safety was almost in sight. Men fell onto the path with a splash. A wheel went over one. He screamed. Terror caught fire. With the inrushing water the reed bed was fast becoming claggy, gooey. Some chariot wheels simply jammed. Panicked, one or two chariots leapt forward too fast, somersaulting, crippling their horses. In seconds, command was lost.

Some sought the far shore—it was Pharaoh's last command, and closer. Some tried to stop, to turn around. Surely the Sheep's divinity was fighting against them, with the second rising of the east wind of choking dust above, and the rising of the waters below. Would he relent if they returned? Swords were drawn, sword against sword. Spears were thrown and lunged. Chaos ensued. The waters now swirled around them. Men thrown from their chariots were lifted up by the waters and swept away. Horses were in blind panic, their riders unsure which way to go, transfixated in the rising flood. Soon it was all over. The wind dropped. The waters flowed as of former times. Peace was restored to its rippling face, reflecting now the glow of dawn.

Pharaoh, standing alone, wept in abject defeat. He shed a tear even for his men, born but to serve him. For are not even the baseborn precious in the sight of one born to become a Guardian? Alas, had he but waited for sunrise, Ra would have come to his aid.

But with dawn had come defeat. Did that mean that Ra had been with Lahveh, perhaps even as a servant, as Arawon and Moyshe had declared? That was heresy. No, that Pharaoh rejected. No, the flood had come as a parting shot from Apophis, for Lahveh was surely a servant to Apophis, demon lord of the night. Totally dejected, pharaoh wallowed in despair, as his charioteer drove slowly home.

Once back home, Pharaoh's first command was to summon the Four Winds to execution. For had they not as one voice counselled him to pursue the Ivrim? Had they not prophesied the defeat of the Sheep? Had the East Wind not allied with Lahveh, to dry up the hidden ford? Had they not ordered the damming and undamming of the waters?

But where were those rats hiding? No one seemed to know. Pharaoh's policy had been to only choose Winds from those counsellor-magicians who had no kin, lest their counsel be swayed. He saw now the error of his ways. For footloose and fancy free, it seemed that they had had early news of Pharaoh's defeat—or had anticipated it—and had expeditiously fled from the face of Pharaoh. Vengeance would not be his, this time.

Safe in the Shur Desert, the Ivrim had mixed feelings. Few felt sad for those who had perished by the hand of Iahveh. Should they pity those who had evilly tried to kill them, whoever killed by? Yet the sight of those drowned bodies—*they once were as we*—still stirred the soul.

Pity must take a backseat. *This is the day that Iahveh has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.* Their deliverance symbolised the death of evil, the end to inhuman oppression and to unjust exploitation, a birth into a higher and deeper level of life. *Sing ye, now to Iahveh, Oh let, music be gay; let now, sung be his praise! For great, are all his ways; Rider, and horse so free, Drowned deep, within the sea.*

It is said that music is a bridge between Earth and Heaven. Under inspiration, Miryam now manifest her majesty in lyricology, melding from the ditties being sung among the people. Along with her mother, had she not entered the courts of Pharaoh? Had she not learnt somewhat of the music of Khem? Truly, she had written hymns for the people of Khem, and laments for her own people, but now she revealed her prophetic voice, for the full joy now was both in what had been and in what was to come. Forsaking unhappy house is fine, yet hope seeks happy home, not homelessness. Iahveh had become their happy home.

She swelled her voice in song, and the people repeated one line. She raised it again, and the people repeated that too. Each time, more and more of the crowd joined in, and the words seeped through the crowd. In later speech, it ran somewhat like this:

"I rise now to sing, for you did rise to free. Horse and horseman, you threw to the sea. You are now to me, my strength and life and song. Divinity, over mighty throng. A warrior you, for your name is Iahveh. And Pharaoh's name, drowned in disarray. Yes his chosen men, buried in lake of reeds. Like stones sank they, and chariot steeds. Your right hand Iahveh, is wondrous in power. That hand Iahveh, did Pharaoh cower. When you rise on high, the proud do sink down low. Yea they do burn, your fire their woe."

"On east wind of change, the wild waters swept back. To north and south, afraid they did stack. Still Pharaoh did seek, to pursue and lives take. He would plunder, yea punish and shake. He boasted success, with

mighty sword in hand. But by your breath, blew back to his land. His army did sink, to him the dawn did grey. Who is like you, Oh divine Iahveh? There is none like you, most glorious Iahveh. Awesome beyond, all we can survey.

“By uplifted hand, did they sink to their doom. Covenant love, raised us from our gloom. By strong arm indeed, unto rest you led forth. Your mighty deeds, were sounded farforth. Terror and trembling, sped to chiefs of the east. Great nations fear, though they be not least. In Chenán too, hearts are melting away. For doom and dread, will not long delay. In great dread of you, hunters sank as cold stone. We did pass by, with you not alone. You will plant us firm, on your mountain so true. In holy place, we will live anew.”

The people quieted. Then she sang a final refrain, and the people sang back in prayer: “Iahveh forever our king you reign.” And they did rejoice far into that night.

On the other bank, the four magicians now stood by the water’s edge. Left to guard the palace, they had become uneasy. Umi had unsettled them all. Zima had sensed his niggling doubt—what if his doubt was justified? Against orders, she decided that they should secretly follow Pharaoh to ensure success. To fly there would have been simple and swift, but it would be better to have an official excuse. And why not?

In their role as magicians, they had prepared some trusted guards, easily convincing them that word from the Guardians had come to them, to assist unseen by Pharaoh, and that it was the will of Osiris that Pharaoh should never know—unless for great need. That provided them with a satisfactory excuse for absence—it might take quite some time—and without overly offending Pharaoh—should he hear—over what formally would be the desertion of their post and a dereliction of duty.

It was a good plan, a just-in-case plan. Unfortunately Qebui and Shehbui had espied their movements, and guessed their plans. Were the diaboloi at work? They had gatecrashed the party, insisting that all Four Winds should go to watch over Pharaoh—was it right that, if it did come out, Pharaoh should think that only two Winds were true to his wellbeing? In short, of course, they suspected that Hutchaiui and Henkhisesui would later claim the sole glory for Pharaoh’s success, and claim supremacy.

So now they all stood still, silently watching the waters of the Yamsuf. They had seen the impenetrable wall of dark cloud, lit within by tongues of fire. They had all sensed a power far above their power. None had dared intervene by their magic.

The magic of the vampires was not, of course, the magic of man. Theirs was the magic of theodynamism, a part of their nature. With us, our mind decides to move towards the tree, and to pluck and eat the apple thereof. Our mind therefore orders our legs, our arms, and our hands, until physically we bite and chew. Our will works through the mediation of matter, physical, neurological lines of command, biological wiring. Should we call this wonder, magic?

Yet in billennia past, the vampires were Simbolinians, creature of wit and will, amorphous minds which circled the liquid crystal planet Simboliniad, even as moths circle a candle. They knew no biology, and derived sustenance through the cosmic rays of deep heaven, converting it to their needs. Without legs, they moved towards matter, by the direct power of their wills; without arms, they moved matter towards them, by the power of their wills. Their wills worked without the mediation of matter. Should we call this wonder, magic?

Their wondrous planet of pure beauty and power, was long gone. They had migrated through our galaxy, until entering our world in Hadean years. Prevented against their will from leaving, they had gradually settled down into physical clothing, mineral giving place to biological—for they could shape themselves. Shapeshifters they remained, though now diminished in power and ability. Still, to some extent they could still control matter directly through the power of their wills. It was not magic to them, though we might call it so.

Now, inwardly they trembled before a deeper *magic*, a greater power of will. For Iahveh too was theodynamic, needing not material appendages to move mountains and wind winds. He also could speak into minds telepathically, influencing the affairs of man. His was a magic, as it were, from before the dawn of time. For he was time's creator, not a creature of time that danced to its tune.

Qebui and Shehbui, of course, were not true magicians compared to them, merely petty pretenders. They had tricks of hand and of nature, though it seems that they had alliance with the Kingdom of Necros,

even with the diaboloi. Thus their fullest magic exceeded the magic of most magicians, for their dark allies were theodynamics from beyond time, conceived in the dynamic bubble. As they gazed upon the silent waters, their dark allies trembled, too.

With the rise of the sun, the show was all over. Qebui and Shehbui felt a quiver of vicious joy trembling within them, for they were indeed hosts to the Necros, they who were haters of man and of all others not of their kind. Indeed, they were haters even of their own kind, and each of their own self.

But their hatred was hierarchical. Hated most was Usen, then the Children of Usen, both the firstborn and the secondborn, both being carriers of the imagodei, the spark of true life. Thus, any field of human conflict, was to them a dark and perverse pleasure. True, they would have preferred the Ivrim, not the Khemites, to have yielded up their bodies to death, but any human death was precious in their sight. And yet amid their joy, they were already formulating plans to harass the Flock of Lahveh; to infiltrate as wolves.

Too late had the magicians followed Pharaoh, and now stood shaken. “Look, Pharaoh drags himself into his chariot, defeated. If we return to the palace before him, will we not return to our deaths? Why not cross over to the other side, and join with the Ivrim?” suggested Qebui.

“Yes,” agreed Shehbui of the South Wind, “for we shall at least escape the wrath of Pharaoh for a time. And he is least likely to seek us among the Ivrim. Moreover, if among them we can turn them, betray them back unto Pharaoh, will he not forgive us our counsel, and welcome us back?”

Zima pondered. For her part, she and her colleague could simply fly across the globe, changing at will their human identities. But she sensed that Umi was inclined to go over to the enemy. After all, the Ivrim were no more enemies to the vampires, than were the Khemites—they had no allegiance to or against mortal man.

And if Umi stayed with the Ivrim, perhaps she should stay with him, watching him like a hawk. If he strayed into the Light, her job was clear. Aloud she simply said: “We will surely perish if we remain in Khem, or if we abide on our own in the desert of Shur. Perhaps the Ivrim will welcome some strong magicians among them, and bid us stay.”

“But we are known to Arawon and to Moysh”, exclaimed Umi. “Nor is our magic as their magic. And will he who leads them, welcome us for our power, the power which opposed him before the face of Pharaoh?”

“Then,” replied Zima, “let us put off our magic, and go before them as supplicants who have been rejected by Pharaoh; who fearing for their lives, will swear loyalty to Moysh. Let us also put off our dwimmer names, and be known by our domestic names. Harken how they sing each one their own song. Now while they rejoice would be best to enter their camp, and our magic can sustain us over the waters. Let us go quickly, therefore, and see what befalls us.”

Soon it was that, dried by the waking sun, they began to mingle with the people on the other side. That was not a problem within a crowd so large and diverse, for no one expected to know every face, and while most were low-clad of the Ivrim, some foreigners from other peoples, including some well-clad of Khem, had come out with them. And the camp was a gladsome and gay company, some lying prostrate in thanks, some jumping up and down, some talking excitedly to friends and family, some singing ditties of praise and hymn, some calming the cattle. The party was open to all of goodwill.

However, it was best not to hide in the crowd, but to gain recognition and friendship from Moysh, as soon as could be. Thus they made a beeline for him—he was easy enough to find. And there and then they bowed down low before him, their chins and foreheads touching the ground as they lay prone before his mercy. He bade them to rise, and then it crossed his mind who they were: *Never mind, for can four among forty thousand, do us any harm?*

Zima spoke for them. “Hail Moysh, mighty prophet of Lahveh most high, chief of divinities, who this day has defeated the Guardians of mighty Khem. We stand before you disgraced by Pharaoh, for our magic has failed him. But our magic, unless you will have it in your service, we will wholeheartedly renounce before you.

“Know that as soon as we saw the arm of Lahveh laid bare, we repented of our counsel, and beseeched mighty Pharaoh to let your people go in honour and in riches. Lay it not to our charge that we opposed you at first, but that we opposed Pharaoh at last. And Pharaoh planned for our deaths, since we begged for your lives. Therefore, please, my lord, allow

us safe conduct within your people, and let it be known that we have the smile of your countenance." Again she sank to her knees in homage.

Though they seemed to be innoxious, Moysh was unsure. Certainly one who stood before him had elected him for a high mission under Pharaoh. He felt that it was for him to decide, for the voice of Lahveh was silent. He felt that grace should be offered. "Within our people, we give welcome to those who flee for their lives and seek our wellbeing. I believe that you were not sent from Pharaoh, for him we left a defeated man, unfit to lay traps for our feet. So, you have flown from Pharaoh, as a sparrow flies from a falcon? You seek us as a safe tree, in whose branches you may perch? I understand. But as to magic, I reject it utterly, for whether it does win or lose, it is abhorrent. None within this camp may seek its power. You say that you have renounced it? Good! I warn you to stay true to your word, for my lord watches over us as a shepherd, and you have seen his power.

"I shall vouchsafe for you, yet warn my people to beware—as a caution—though I cannot foresee what dangers four unarmed foreigners can pose to us who walk in the blessings of Lahveh. But by what names shall I speak of you?"

Zima replied that he who had been Qebui of the North, by common name was called Yanness. That he who had been Shehbui of the South, by common name was called Yambress. That he who had been Henkhisesui of the East, by common name was called Umi. And that she who had been Hutchaiui of the West, by common name was called Zima. And so it was that they, two vampires and two men of the diaboloi, now came to dwell in the camp of Lahveh. Unseen, Lahveh smiled, and held his peace.

Days crawled on. Short was the jubilation of sweet freedom. Now the bitter realities of life hit home—one must after all, drink. Even the cattle were moaning, for three days under the sun they had walked, without finding fresh water.

A few people asked whether it would be best to return? After all, Pharaoh had seen his land punished for mistreating his slaves. So wouldn't he treat them kindly as willing servants, that is, if they offered to work for him on low wages? That would be wise for both sides—they could cooperate. For all they now found on their journey, was one tiny pool of bitter water, not fit for cattle.

Few listened to such rants, but still concerns were voiced to Moysh. And what did he do? Why, he threw into the water a puny little twig, just a gesture that Lahveh himself must work a miracle. But behold, they tasted the water again, and it was as the best of sparkling water. And Moysh heard an inner voice affirming Lahveh as their divinity, who besides curing water could cure all their diseases. In short, that like a husband to a loyal wife, he would provide their needs. Far from suffering by his hand—as had the people of Khem—his hand offered protection. Later on, they came across a good campsite, where there was good shade and much water, and stayed there several weeks.

Of course it wasn't to be a permanent site—it was not the land promised. And right enough, the community upped and left. Most expected to have their fill of milk and honey soon enough. *Heigh-ho, Heigh-ho, to Synaj now we go.* It was a merry jingle as they set forth with high hopes. Yet soon they entered the Land of Mid-barsyn, and as supplies ran short, they changed their tune: *When hopes ran high, new life begun, we thought that we, could almost fly. Then joyful were, the songs we sung, in first few days, when hopes ran high.*

Early one morning, Yanness met Nahebi, one of the tribal leaders, with one simple question: "Why does your leader take you this way?" And for the life of him, Nahebi could not answer. Thus with one seed, Yanness began to sow a field of discontent.

"I think that we should head west, for where there is water, there is food for the animals, and the food of animals for us", added Yambress, almost casually. "Yes," said he puffing out his chest, "we who were counsellors of Pharaoh, were not counsellors for nothing, yet your Moysh refuses to consult with us. I find his lack of faith, disturbing."

Pacifically, Yanness added: "Of course, Moysh is a worthy leader, and your divinity is greater still. Yet it is Moysh who leads, and he blindly refuses our help, sadly because we are from Khem. Alas, were he but a little more broad-minded, I do really think that we could be of help."

It got Nahebi wondering, and that evening he spoke with a few of the leaders. All were feeling the pinch of reduced rations. The men were going without, so that the women and children should at least eat, and nursing mothers in particular needed food for milk, but even so, children were crying. May it be that Moysh, undisputedly the right

one to have led them out, was the wrong one to lead them through and into? Was it high time to replace him? Lahveh was not showing up. Was it because he was disappointed with Moysh?

The two vampires soon picked up on such murmurings, but why should they get involved on either side? Heads down, was their motto: empty bellies meant nothing to them. Umi was curious though. Would Lahveh strike dead those who questioned his leadership? He wouldn't put it past him. Personally, he found this community exodus, educational. Were these people really to be Usen's main plan, or were they a decoy, a base deception? It's not that Umi cared a microbe for such miseries, but it was interesting. Zima was simply whiling away the hours, discreetly shadowing Umi.

The next day, a strong contingent roughly approached the tent of Moysh. Umi stood listening, not taking a part, but taking it all in. Chamwa spoke for them. "Moysh, no longer can we accept you or Arawon as our leaders. No longer do we have confidence in your leadership. For are you not lost, and have you not gotten us lost? Why have you led us this way? Can we eat the gold of Khem, and feed our animals with our sandals? Have you not led us to our deaths?"

Moysh, praying before replying, saw the gist of what he had to say. He told them off for doubting he and his brother's leadership. Lahveh who had chosen both—he who had overthrown Khem and delivered his people—was the leader whom the Ivri leaders were prepared to ditch. *Don't blame us for the message; we're the messengers.* Yes, they would have to face him. However, the food issue had been a test for them, a test they had failed, for it had been an attitude test.

As for the bodily need, Lahveh well understood. In fact—he said—the regular migration of quails was due that evening, when they would roost for the night on their southbound journey in their traditional site. The timing, both of the quails and their own camping in the very place where the quails landed only once in spring, should convince the doubters that Lahveh was in charge.

Moreover, from thenceforth, he would supply them six mornings each week with a strange white substance which would coagulate in the mornings. It would be, like dough, inedible unless baked. But once baked, it would taste sweet and tasty. It would sustain them.

Moysh added that this daily bread would teach and test them: let all who would follow his word, gather only enough each day for each day's supply—any excess would putrefy overnight. On the other hand, every sixth day, let those who trusted him, gather enough for two day's supply, and be prepared to fast on the seventh day if the previous day's supply putrefied overnight. For this idea of resting in faith, must become an important part of their community thinking.

Nor was it only word of mouth. For they then saw their divinity as a cloud of glory in the distance, a cloud which did not speak to them but spoke to Moysh. Was Lahveh grumbling against *them*, that they saw but heard not? Had they stupidly grumbled against Moysh, to avoid the obvious fact that they were blaming Lahveh? Weren't they but blithering idiots, believing that he had picked them up only to drop them? *Don't make that mistake again.*

Soon the prophecy materialised. Quails landed in their droves, exhausted from their long flight. They landed, only to scurry squawking away from the hungry crowd. That evening, many a fat fowl met its fate over the fire, their long migration rudely terminated.

That evening, the camp resounded again with the sounds of song and dance, for meat can make the heart merry. Life once more seemed worth living. Much talk went on well into the night, about the troubling yet reassuring sight of Lahveh, and praise to his high priest. Umi too was troubled and reassured. Though close encounter with a jailer troubles any prisoner, he had been passed over.

That night, Umi too had feasted. Feasting greedily, one of the revellers had polished off his food—that was fine. But he had followed his food with a little wine from a communal wine-jar, stolen while others slept in content—that was bad. In design, such wine-jars were common enough, tall, narrow with slimmer neck, two handled ceramics, lined with bees wax, and capped with clay over a leaf-reed bung. But in quantity, they were far from common in the camp, and their solitary wine cart had been given special care in rolling over the reed bed. They were not common stock for common use, and the plan was to party once they reached Chenán—that should have been, what, maybe two months? Refilling his flagon the thief stumbled away from the host unseen—but Umi saw him.

Silently the man stole away. More silently, Umi followed. Vampires can walk as silently as the firstborn, whose form they had once borne. Not that the winebibber would have noticed an elephantine tread. But once he was far from the camp perimeter, Umi grabbed him from behind, clamping one hand over his victim's mouth.

Vainly this man of the Ivrim struggled. Vainly his befuddled mind struggled for answers. Why he was accosted? Was it a rough joke or rough justice? What was wrong with stealing some wine? What was this pain in the neck; whose the hot breath? *Blast, the fool has caused me to drop my cup—waste of good wine.* Questions faded; struggling died. Departing, Umi dropped the bloodless body alone in the dark.

Later on that night, he met up with Zima, who too had feasted. She sensed a strange satisfaction about Umi, and discovered that he had slain his victim. "Fool!" she cried telepathically. "Here we are, strangers in a strange camp, a special camp of Usen's children, and you endanger us by killing your meal? Death draws ever nearer—do not hasten it."

Umi was unrepentant. "Let Usen judge me, if he will. But the man was a thief within the camp, stealing from his own. Does not Usen himself reject thieves? Should he not commend me, not condemn me? Besides, how will he find out? He visits his flock, but he does not watch over them. And who among the secondborn would discern my handiwork?"

"Anyway, even if they inform him of a single death, he does not condemn the killing of his own. Unless he rebukes the wolf, why should he rebuke me? And if he rebukes me, will he rebuke himself? Are the water-sodden bodies of Khem, not testimony against him?"

Zima suspected that there was more to it than that. Umi did not normally bleed his food dry—was he, angry? His attempted justification was disingenuous. A wolf might need to kill; Umi did not. Usen might judicially kill his children; Umi wasn't called to be a judge. No, Umi had played the fool, and a dangerous fool at that.

But was he worse than a fool? Had he been riled by the insolence of the thief? Identifying with the morals of the Children, was a dangerous sign of psychic decay. Why bother whether they heal or harm? If challenged, he would doubtless deny it. To enquire would show her doubts. She must still shield her suspicion. She wondered if dwelling so close to Usen, endangered *her* mind: Umi used to be safe.

The community seemed to be gelling better, getting used to bivouacking in the rugged surrounds. No longer did they feel the crack of the whip. They were now free people, though adjusting to their divinity was taking some time. Some had complained that the meat feast had been a one-off coincidence. Some had doubted what Moysh had said about the strange bread—*mánnak*, they called it—being now a regular supply each morning except each seventh.

For unknown reason, the idea, seven, was being coded in as something special. But they blundered into it, as was their wont. First they had gathered too much. They naturally knew better than Moysh. But the excess stunk to high heaven. Then they had assumed that on the sixth day, they should only gather enough for that day. They naturally knew better than Moysh—let him kick up a stink if he must. They fully understood this *mánnak*—nature remains the same. But mistaken, they went without food the next day. The big picture dawned on them: *follow the set rules; don't set your own*.

The rules were odd, for according to nature, every day was the same in itself. Zima and Umi both wondered why on earth such rules were given. If he wished to feed the people, why not feed them daily bread? What was so special about each seventh day? Obviously these Sheep had never heard of it being special before. Why was it now?

In fact why, since these sheep seemed so churlish, did Lahveh not simply forsake this fractious flock, this chuntering child? How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is, to have a thankless child! Even regular and tasty feeding, soon bored them! How very human! Yet Usen claimed to care for boorish humanity. What was his game?

After leaving the land of Mid-barsyn, they moved to Rafidym. There they complained to the high heavens about their messenger—not of course about their divinity. No, safer to attack a king's ministers, before attacking the king, for isn't loyalty to his messengers, less important than loyalty to him?

This time, they had arrived at their new camp at a time when they were low on water. Neither no oasis or stream offered any help. Suddenly before their eyes, they saw yet again their precious livestock

being hung out to dry, and themselves hightailing it hotfoot back to where they had had water galore. Though fed on miracles, this flock were easily spooked, fair weather friends to Moysh their shepherd.

Watching him attentively, one wondered whether Moysh would crack under such venomous attacks. He lectured them, pleaded with them, then prayed. He was fed up, disgruntled with the disgruntled. Grumbling is infectious, but he bottled it in. This time his request brought the needed response, shaming the people into gratitude. Never had Umi and Zima witnessed, at such close range, the incredible forbearance of Usen. What was his little game, that for their backs he gave water instead of a whip? Moysh begged them to remember that here they were tested, and had failed the test. He begged deaf ears to hear, to heed, to trust, to obey, to treasure.

After some days, they set off again. Yet their short stay had not gone unnoticed, nor had gleams of gold which spoke of treasure taken by them from Khem. Only days into their trek, local marauders, led by their chief, Anialec, attacked the stragglers. Some older and frailer people had dropped out behind their particular tribes. And behind the tribes were the foreign peoples, less numbered and less armed. Many fell by the hand of Anialec—farming tools and clubs compared ill to swords. Still, some of these vultures of the desert fell, and their weapons went to better hands. Zima and Umi feasted furtively.

The Ivrim had had their first taste of battle. It would not be their last. Various men had shown some aptitude in shoring up their defences. In particular, I'hoshua had led many of his tribe to the defence of the weaker of the people, and the raiders had been forced to retreat. As dusk fell, he set sturdy young men to shield the more vulnerable, commanding them to both stay vigilant and to patrol the perimeter.

Satisfied with defences, he sought out Moysh, as if their general. He never doubted that Iahveh had anointed Moysh to the task, and would always support him. “Moysh my lord, this first day we have fought back the enemy. I have posted rear guards in case of night attack, for we do not know how these people fight. But we must take thought of the morn, for I fear that they will attack again.”

Moysh smiled: here was an upright commander of men. “I'hoshua, you have done well. You have risked your life for the lives of the weak. You always confirm or exceed the expectations I have of you. Tarry awhile,

while I pray. Yet I am sure that Lahveh will aid us against our enemy. After all, he plans to take us into a country of our own, a land flowing with milk and honey." For a while, the two men knelt side by side.

After I'hoshua had bowed in worship before Moysh, he left the tent, leaving Moysh to meet Lahveh alone. I'hoshua feared, yet longed to meet, Lahveh. No divinity is for anyone at any time to meet without quaking, and never to be met without the shaking of human legs. Already his glory had been seen at a distance. And at a distance, I'hoshua would much rather remain, unless he was summoned.

In the dark of night, Moysh received his battle orders for the next day. He summoned I'hoshua to captain the army. Like a pharaoh, Moysh would sit watching. From a nearby hilltop, he would stretch forth his staff, the same serpent-staff he had used in the house of Pharaoh, and at the parting of the Yamsuf. And in honour of his faith, Lahveh would help his people to fight, and would defend them against their slippery enemy. Years later, he would do something similar, but using a statue of a serpent.

Neither Zima nor Umi overheard the battle plans, for a strong invisible aura surrounded Moysh's tent, making it off-limits to their kind. It seemed like approaching too near to a fire that will burn any foolish flesh that defies its warning. But next day they observed the strategy. Curiously, the staff didn't change the situation, as it had before, but it did change the people. Whenever it was lowered, the enemy shouted with bloodlust, and the Ivrim melted like wax. Two men acted as bodyguards for Moysh, perhaps also to watch and pray for the needy flock. But before the end of the battle, their main task seemed to be to help Moysh to keep the staff highly exalted. *Armrests, thought Umi, would surely be more efficient than human arms, but then, maybe Lahveh would not work with handmade arms.*

It had been a strange day. Zima and Umi had not fought, by reason of their apparent age and skills. They had seen trained fighters and superior weapons, defeated by untrained fighters and inferior weapons. Not that the Ivrim hadn't previously taken some weapons from their enemy, but you still need to train with new weapons.

As the two reflected on the battle, they wondered whether it had been arranged by Usen to bless his people a little, to prepare them for

bigger battles ahead, and also to punish them a little for their repeated disloyalty: many Ivrim, put to sleep by the sword, awoke to meet their judge. Umi wondered whether Moysh holding out a weary arm that needed help, showed the inner Moysh. And might even Lahveh weary of sustaining such sheep?

Funny, though, before a dozen new moons had risen, Anialec and his men would be back for a rematch, raising their fists yet again in defiance of the Ivrim and Lahveh. Did they not see that their pasture and water could be safely shared with a wandering people, and that life was more precious than gold?

But then would be then, and now was now. For now, the Ivrim licked their wounds, learnt to boast in battle scars, and learnt deeper respect for their leader. He who had extended his arms to save his people from that savage attack, had been no fool on a hill. Nor had he—or I'hoshua—taken credit for fighting off their enemy. Moysh raised a monument to the unseen general. On it was chiselled the name, *Iahvehnisi*. It witnessed that they had rallied under a divine banner.

Then they moved on. Before long, they arrived at a mountain which Moysh had visited as a shepherd a lifetime ago. Ah, you could see from the wistful look in his eyes, that those had been simple and uncomplicated days, a life gone beyond recall. Now his sheep were more troublesome, more foolish, more precious.

After Arawon's report on Khem, Moysh had sent Zephora home for her safely. Now he hired local shepherds to summon her. Before many days, his family arrived, and he had relief from his burdens, being touched once more by her sweetness. In the glow of that covenant, and her in his arms, he slept sounder than he had for many a long moon. Umi was almost envious to see Moysh's face the next day.

For her part, Zima sought no rest for the weary, and the idea of drawing comfort from another being, was repugnant to her. Each vampire was an island; its heart purely for itself. Yes you could, and should, enjoy your surrounds, for the universe was a marvellous creation. Even chained to Arda, vampires revelled in its beauty. Yes it lacked the glow of their long lost planet, those shimmering rays of every changing colour, that enriching warmth as they had bathed within it. But still, for a cell, Arda was an enjoyable cell.

But what if, what if her shackles fell off? Why, if the joy of her youth returned by some miracle, she would rise from Arda and plunge herself into the nearest star, and then, refreshed and cleaned, she might very well return to this planet—for a while. But as a voluntary guest, not as a prisoner marooned by the Eighth Law of Usen.

But precisely because the universe, the world, made no demands on her, she could love them. Yes, love your universe, your world, but not persons. Persons always had their own agendas, which might not serve you best. Why give your heart to another? Why did baseborn mortals marry, and take comfort in one another? Two might be stronger than one, but both were surely weaker, shackled, prisoners.

Zima and Umi could have suggested to Moysh what Ragèl suggested that morning. His first-honeymoon gift had been his eldest daughter. His second-honeymoon gift was about a sound judicial system. But the vampires were not trusted into the inner council of Moysh—few people were, especially outsiders.

But his foreign father-in-law, having been brought up to speed about what had been done, and what Moysh's job entailed, urged Moysh to a little more wisdom. In short, that at least when it came to petty cases, Moysh shouldn't let himself be drained by acting as judge. Fine, he was the best judge, being closest to his divinity—whom Ragèl happily now acknowledged to be the greatest of all divinities. But he would soon be a dead judge, unless he paced himself in that role.

Before Ragèl arrived, Yanness and Yambress had been trying to overwhelm Moysh by overload—for overload leads to depression. They had egged many grumblers to pester Moysh with petty complaints against others. But by heeding Ragèl, that weight lifted from the shoulders of Moysh. For others who were usenic, wise, and unselfish, became petty judges of petty cases within the community. Moysh took a backseat—supreme judge for supreme cases, and lawgiver. The best must not die prey to the good. Ragèl left, leaving behind daughter, grandsons, and a smiling son-in-law.

Perhaps the new additions to the camp, helped prepare Moysh for the big test which loomed high on the horizon. They journeyed on once more, soon looking up and seeing the ponderous mountain of Synaj. Their destiny drove them inexorably to its base. It was the mountain

where Lahveh had first spoken with their leader, and where he would speak to him again.

Now that Moysh had gotten his second wind, he was open to further challenge, but even for him it would not be easy. A challenge it would be, for there the covenant would be upgraded to forge the many into one united nation. From a benign concern for their wellbeing, their suzerain lord offered to forge them into a prophetic and priestly nation, wherein lifestyle and ceremonies would be key to loyalty, and where within safety they could get to know him intimately. They would have to count the cost, and decide one way or the other.

Mount Synaj was a significant sight, more so than the petty pyramids to Khem. But a *holy* mountain? Well, speak of it as you will. It was a mountain, however, that could become holy for a season, set aside for a sacred task, clothed head to foot—so to speak—with glory, which otherwise was but naked rock stained somewhat with the caress of life. Similarly, is a temple not holy only while its divinity dwells within, yet a reminder of holiness even if that divinity departs?

Moysh climbed a little of the way up alone. Did he revisit the spot where he had first met with Lahveh? Well, whether he did or didn't didn't matter, just wasn't important. What was was news beyond their wildest dreams. For what was now offered to his people, was a onetime free upgrade adjustment to the Covenant of Avraam. That itself had been extended through the third generation, before being widened. Now it could be deepened. But the perils of intimacy were manifest even by the bounds of the mountain. For to even touch the mountain—while the glory was there—would be death to any except Moysh and any he invited. They must respect the set bounds.

Still, the offer was good. Lahveh kept a weather eye on their wellbeing. Now he offered them intimacy—is not betrothed-marriage deepened by wedded-marriage? On their part it would involve obedience, not just loyalty. He would go into the specifics for a national covenant, only if they were happy to accept it in principle.

As to intimacy, they recalled the ancient story that at the beginning of the Sixth Age, a man and a woman stood apart as priest and priestess of a garden temple, and as king and queen of their fructuous

kingdom. It was said that they had walked intimately with Lahveh, until cut off by disobedience.

Lahveh offered game-changing intimacy to his chosen people, to walk and talk with them as a community. They all would be as those two royal priests at the beginning of their Age, walking righteously and fruitfully with their lord. But they would be cut off from the wider world of their day; others would think them a peculiar people.

Paradise restored, seemed a generous offer too good to refuse, and with one voice they gratefully accepted. Over the mountain, clouds of thunder settled, as a hen upon her chicks, and they knew that they were heard. The dawn of that new covenant relationship had begun. It was foretold that before full ratification, they themselves would hear Lahveh speak, for awe would form a deep part of this relationship, even of their priesthood.

And from them, each as a priest before all other peoples of the world—the Goyim peoples—some would be more intimate, priests unto the priests. And from them, one would be most intimate, a high priest unto the priests over the priests over the common. And whether any could go further in and further up, only time would tell.

But in order to begin that journey, even common priests unto Lahveh needed the clothing stains of their travel journey, to be washed away. That was symbolic of a holy consecration unto Lahveh. Then he would draw closer—but not too close, mind you. Too much too soon would be death to them, unbearable holiness. Even their precious livestock mustn’t get too close, on pain of death. The mountain itself was, for that time, as a temple shrine.

After some days of expectation and preparation, an unnatural storm swept the mountain face. And like a mighty wind, there came a sound as of giant horns blowing from the mountain top, as if the lion who roars to strike all nations with fear, had proclaimed himself seated as king over all high kings. The earth quaked beneath their feet, and their legs trembled. Yet they had prepared themselves for this encounter. For days they had even refrained from marital joys, as they psyched themselves up to behold the supreme joy of their people.

Has it not rightly been said that death is death to marriage, and that beyond the veil, marriage shall be no more? For some short days, they had striven to see beyond the veil into the fullness beyond.

For his part, Umi had often watched in fascination as souls of the departed entered through the Gates of Ra, as they sailed down the river unto the judgement seat of Osiris. He knew of course that the varying ways of each Guardian kingdom, were simply precursors of a final judgement seat, when Usen would judge. Even as Lahveh would himself judge transgressors, now he was seated upon the mountain.

And Lahveh spoke. He gave ten general sketches, signalling what the relationship was to look like. Having delivered them from slavery, he was happy to walk joyously with them, but for that to work they first needed to know how to walk properly with him: some family rules. They must never imagine anyone else to be his equal or better. But that he was incomparably above and beyond all, they could not quite fathom. What they could see, was pledging exclusive loyalty to him on the spiritual level. Disrespecting him would weaken future generations. Respecting him would strengthen future generations. There need be no end to their relationship, if respect reigned as king. He built in weekly reminders, both to focus them on loyalty, and on the strange idea that he himself had created their world. He was more than even old divinities—even Ra of the Khem. And what other divinity had ever established a covenant with man? Their society was to be cohesive, for each member would be sharers in one covenant from womb to tomb—yes wives no less than husbands; mothers no less than fathers.

And fitting the idea of creation and creator, parental respect and obedience was expected from older children. Moreover, along those same lines of thought, murder even beyond their own people, was wrong—there again was that idea of equality, imagodei. And fidelity in the covenant of marriage, as it would be in the national covenant, was basic. And things like stealing and immoral deception—well, such disrespecting of others was wrong, and disrespected their suzerain who had indirectly created those wronged. Why, even the wishing to wrongfully gain what ought not to be yours, was wrong. He was part of the fabric of society.

That of course was only a rough sketch of how things were to be, a setting out of his stall. But even such raised some concerns. It was a big ask, even if given in a soothing voice. But to be loudly thundered out directly by their divinity, why that was downright unnerving! Too uncomfortably did it invade their personal space, though none dared to speak their hidden thoughts.

Without discussion, as if a herd with one heart and mind, they had quietly backed off a distance from the foot of the mountain. Further interaction, they insisted, must be limited to their spokesman, Moysh. Yes, let their fearless leader hear, and then just tell them what was required of them. Let priesthood be for priests, not for them—let them be commoners. If Moysh got it wrong, let him carry the can.

Moysh begged them to all stand closer and hear. Should not these nascent royal-priests, ascend the slopes of Synaj—and with boldness? But no, they were not in the mood for mountain climbing today, thank you very much. And having backed off—surely Iahveh revered their reverence?—there they would stay.

Fearing that Moysh must be a little deaf, they repeated in no uncertain terms, that their presence simply wasn't needed. Moysh sadly saw that they followed their inner hearts, saw that they followed their righteous fear into unrighteousness, rather than into righteousness. Already seeds of corruption had germinated.

It has been said that to merely hear the *mandata Dei* can soothe, but to hear *Deum mandatum*, will surely terrify by majesty so great. It was understandable, really. Even Moysh gave up on them. After all, you can lead a camel to water, but you cannot lead a disobedient people to Iahveh, nor make them drink from the well of salvation.

Iahveh seemed to accept that truism as a fact of life, and to respect their choice. With Moysh he went much more into details. Fortunately, Moysh was well trained in the legislative skills of Khem, well placed to understand his task. Many an important topic they covered together, as the people waited like sheep for their shepherd. Moysh was taught how to make sacrifices unto Iahveh, about sundry matters of the covenant, and was invited to climb higher up the mountain, along with six team leaders from each tribe.

Hidden in their human guise and travelling among the foreigners who had left with the Ivrim, Umi and Zima heard all that had been reported back and written down. Even foreigners needed to know, if they were to integrate into the Ivrim. “Altars here, altars there”, said Zima disgustedly. “Even we do not crave worship. Is it not offensive that the creator should crave for the adulation of his creatures? Hogwash!”

Umi was less disparaging. “Zima, we stand closer to him than our people have ever done. Many a time, vampires have been sent to spy out the land, whether to see what the Children are up to, or to see what their father above is up to. Being so placed, should we not try to understand what he is plotting? Might we not prevent the Seventh Age, if we can but discern his mind? And is he not revealing his mind to these people?”

“He is revealing his mind to Moysh,” replied Zima, “but who is to say that Moysh is revealing it to the people?”

But Umi was adamant: “He intended all to hear directly, though they refused to hear. So surely, what he now speaks to Moysh, he commands Moysh to speak truly to the Sheep, since it is what he wishes to say to them. Would Moysh dare disobey? And we too must weigh his words, for in understanding him, we might save ourselves.

“Now, you speak about his base itch to be worshipped. We have long found that undignified. But ask yourself, why is it that he seems content with makeshift worship sites of sodden soil and rough rocks—which any clod could make for personal use? Why does he not demand ornate temples in Khem, or even fancy and bejewelled altars in this wilderness? Is the underlying message, that he ranks fellowship about fanciness?”

Zima was gobsmacked. She had fancied herself to be the clever one, and now Umi seemed to be teaching her a thing or two. Lahveh seemed to be asking for much worship, but for common worship. Still, that he was asking for any, was still a problem for her. Why should he not simply demand their actions, as a master to slaves? Had Pharaoh wished the Ivrim to worship him? No, simply to serve him. But perhaps she should pay more attention to what lay behind what Lahveh was saying through his servant-priest. Know your enemy.

After a while, she asked, “But what about all his talk on slaves? That must have irked these sheep, who not long ago were but slaves.”

Umi mulled that over. “Perhaps it was said now, to stir up their minds to that very fact, and to underline that it was he who saved them from

their slavery. And with that in their minds, to encourage them to be better masters to their slaves—for slaves there shall always be. Don't the hungry choose slavery, before starvation? Does he desire the fair treatment of others—as imagodei?

“Moreover, his speech says that they should take into account all the salient circumstances behind any given offence. Doesn't that annul a merely mechanical application of law—*do this, suffer that*—and ask that punishments fit crimes, no more, no less? Doesn't that show his concern to see justice triumph over punishment; that sinners get a fair crack of the whip?”

“He's not like that”, exclaimed Zima. “Our imprisonment testifies to his tyranny. We are beached here upon this silent shore, shackled to its fate. It's perverse if he cares for the psuchai, if he cares not for the pneumata. We are the imperishable wood; they are the ephemeral weeds.”

“And yet,” added Umi thoughtfully, “the signs proclaim that he does care for them. Has he not rescued his sheep? Has he not forbore their wanderings from him? Does he not enjoin that they should care for their own kind—even to the weeding of the evil from their field, though they keep their inner weeds? We do not care, but we need not care. But might they have something to teach us?”

Zima felt threatened by such a question, when No was the axiomatic reply. “Umi, beware your loose tongue, for it could lead you into trouble. Think not that the worm has aught to teach the bird. As Usen forbears with his sheep, must I forbear with you?” Unwisely, Zima had just exposed her fears that he might be sliding towards the Light. Foolish. No, best give Umi enough rope to hang himself, and if he proved himself traitor, hang him high. If he was, or was becoming, a danger to the Night, for her own sake she should encourage him to reveal, not to conceal, heretical thoughts.

Umi was taken aback, suddenly sensing his danger. Yes, his own kind cared nothing for each other, only that in unity there was strength for all, and each sought that strength. On the other hand, if there was more for them to learn, should they not learn? Was strength not in knowledge, and such strength good for each individual within the collective? Besides, over multiple millennia beyond count, these two had travelled the land together, as a hand in a glove.

For the first time, he wondered whether in fact he had developed a liking for walking with her, for sharing with her his thoughts. Had the Light tainted him? But life could be lonely without sharing. When they had lived within the orb of Simboliniad, none of their kind had had any more thought for each other, than famished locusts, festively attacking field and forest, seek fellowship as they graze on green.

“It cannot be, I know”, he humbly confessed. “I meant only that it can seem to be. Perhaps Usen is using them to sow seeds of division within us. But then why destroy us from within, when he could destroy us from without, on a whim? He is so inscrutable, that he fills me with fear. We must, of course, stand against him and his evil plans.”

Zima was somewhat reassured. Then it suddenly dawned on her that *for his sake* she was pleased to be reassured. Vampires should never care for the sakes even of their own kind. Fellow vampires were usable, but not loveable. Was this the baleful influence of Lahveh? Was infection the real danger of dwelling among his chosen people?

Yes, the Children had weakness to teach, which the strong must not learn. But all through that night, they mulled over even the minutiae of what Moysh had said. Why were only the Ivri men obliged to gather thrice each year before Lahveh? They discerned repeated themes: rising above general society’s norms; the sanctity of human life; more equality of human status—based on equality of life-image for both male and female; proportionality of punishment—as justice and deterrent; alternative punishments such as compensation; spiritual importance above social or individual importance; generosity. Even foreigners were to be cared for. Did Usen *really* believe in all that?

Early in the morning, Moysh arose. Together with his team leaders, he ascended the mountain. The general consensus of the camp continued to be to go ahead with ratifying the covenant on offer, with a general proviso that the people at large were always allowed a safe distance from their divinity.

At the foot of Synaj, Moysh had first performed various ceremonies of a sacrificial nature, in token of spiritual nature. He had in mind adjusting the original Twelve Tribes. One tribe would be co-opted from secular focus, into spiritual. One tribe would be split into two,

to keep the special code of Twelve, and perhaps to symbolise that in future days, the Twelve would expand.

But his sacrifices covered all who had at first been opted into the family covenant by their forefather Iakov, and covered those who had opted into the people-covenant. And yet activated, opt-out times were written into it, times perhaps for the people to ask whether their divinity had remained loyal to them; perhaps to ask whether they had remained loyal to him.

The two vampires had remained firmly below the foot of the mountain. Like the Sheep, they had no wish to approach any closer. Indeed it had turned into a by-invitation-only, and they were not invited. Death now invited the presumptuous to gate-crash, and would reward them with its coin.

Only the invited team of seventy-two plus Moysh and Arawon, went part-way up the mountainside, celebrating there a covenant meal. Only two were called any higher. The rest were sent back down to await them. Arawon felt it a bit disappointing that he—along with his two sons and four other elders representing his tribe—had not been permitted to climb higher. After all, his tribe especially represented all the tribes.

When Arawon returned to basecamp, he was met by the flattering ill-wishers, Yanness and Yambress. “Hail, noble Arawon, by whose staff we were well defeated before the throne of Pharaoh. Strange it seems to us, that you have descended so soon, when Moysh still abides above.

“For to us, you seem the greater in wisdom, in holiness, and in speech. For is it not true that your younger brother could but stutter before the face of Pharaoh, and that the words of Iahveh flowed through his mouth by the honey of your voice? And that the power of Iahveh flowed through his staff by the strength of your hand? Why, therefore, has the greater returned, when the lesser has remained?” they asked.

Arawon could not help but feel flattered. These were obviously intelligent men, of excellent discrimination. “Hail, Yanness and Yambress, mighty from the magicians of Pharaoh’s court, and supplicants now unto the court of Iahveh.

“Well, to answer your question, I was simply not permitted higher. But I was permitted, beyond my deserts, to marvel at the majesty of my lord

Iahveh. For with Moysh I, with my sons and the seventy, have beheld his glory upon the mountain, beauty beyond compare. He has put more gladness in my heart than when grain and wine abound. Surely in peace will I lie down and sleep at ease, for he will make my bed in safety. Why should I begrudge my brother his lot?"

"But," answered Yanness, "what is your lot, you who should lead and not follow? And what have you seen and heard, that you begrudge not a younger brother more? Few there be who happily call their lesser, *lord*."

"Ah," said Arawon, "but the glory I have seen is a leveller of all men. For behold, as we walked, a shining mist came down upon us. It was enough that we worshipped him at a distance. And lo, did we not see our divinity enthroned there, with his feet upon what seemed to be of gems stones, even as a carpet of lapis lazuli royally laid upon the barren rock? And as we gazed on Iahveh, we understood much more of him—but it is not permitted to say more in mere words, but only to express the revelation as wisdom through transformed lives."

"Ah, but then perhaps more was in store for your younger brother, of what you were not deemed worthy to see? Perhaps he would see the very face of Iahveh", said Yambress. At that it seemed to him that Arawon was a little bit bitter, that though having had so much blessing, he had had less than his little brother. The Necros was enjoying this.

Arawon hesitated. "Well, no," he said slowly, "I do not think that Iahveh will show his full plan, his full face, to my brother. Besides, it would not be to him alone, for I'hoshua went with him."

Like venom, Yanness continued to burn. "I find it surpassing strange that one, not of your holy tribe, should enter into a more holy level than you who spoke boldly before the face of Pharaoh. But why were you snubbed, that this fledgling has been given the privilege which should have been yours as Moysh's elder? Yet perhaps knowing that the mountain is a dangerous place to linger long, perhaps Iahveh has sent you back, that if Moysh and his young apprentice perish on mountain high, you yourself will lead us to safety."

With a bow, the two deceivers turned, leaving Arawon not to rejoice in the great honour shown him, but to resent that others were shown greater honour. His smile had fallen. With any luck, a poisonous root of resentment would grow, spiritually ruining the whole camp.

Many things had been written down about the life over the horizon, when they would settle down to community life in the fields. It had sounded exciting. It had sounded genuine. It was promised that a messenger would go before them into that land, to prepare the way.

The Sheep had wondered why—why not Lahveh himself? It seemed clear to the vampires, that a second level power was commissioned by Lahveh to oversee the general wellbeing of his people. Lahveh was surely saying that he himself wasn't necessary for such a task, though obedience to the power—as if Lahveh himself—would be crucial. In short, they must learn to live with indirect oversight, not direct management from on high.

He had said much to regulate life, once he was less evident. And that seemed strange to the vampires. For if Usen were vainglorious—as they had long believed—and had selected a particular people to be his worshipping sheep, then why appoint a lesser shepherd? Why not stay close, micromanage, not allow the people to stray from you, keep them close to satisfy your vanity? Why take a back seat?

Umi was learning things about the enemy's ways. But why did he allow spies into his camp? "Zima, the enemy must know that we are here, and yet he makes no move to purge us from his people. He seems to crave what he calls *love*, a heart affection towards another but not for gain. So why, knowing we hate him, does he permit our presence?"

Zima had been puzzled for some time. As Umi had said, surely Usen the All-knowing, must know that they were there. It seemed also that though he did not *show* himself face to face, he *spoke* face to face, directly, that is, with one of the Children, this Moysh. Since he was giving the Sheep his commands, why not command the death of Umi and her, and so purge the camp? Even if merely driven out, Usen would have purged his camp of powerful enemies—at least of them.

"I do not know, Umi, but to thwart him, we must remain and risk his wrath. But if his hatred is towards all who hated him, he would surely have slain us by now, and summoned us beyond death unto his judgement. He seems to tolerate us, though he must hate us."

But did Usen really did hate them? Umi doubted. "Though before the face of Pharaoh we opposed him, we have not opposed him here. Indeed, it seems to me that his own sheep have opposed him more than we who spy have. For we merely played our part as commanded by Pharaoh.

"But these stubborn sheep, have time and again rebelled against him as their shepherd. And yet so far he has spared them—at large. And they are apt to stray again, whether stirred up by outsiders, or by their own evil. For they are but mortals, soon come and soon gone, and often too quick to decide on paths to take—for time swiftly passes them by. Yet if he loves them, evil as they are, might it be that he does not hate us?"

The face of Zima was troubled. "Umi, you know now that I watch you and weigh your words. Beware, lest I must call upon our queen to punish you, for you stray perilously close to heresy."

"But yes, perhaps as you say, that though he loves us not, perhaps he has no hatred for us. Doubtless in the deep past he has had, but maybe no longer—a former hatred perhaps long burnt out? True it is that he seldom naysays the Night, and mostly leaves us in peace. Perhaps he tolerates us without hate. Indeed, if he tolerates the Sheep, why should he not tolerate us too? For we are not as wolves among his sheep."

"Or might it be that he means to deceive us, even as by prestidigitation one watches only one hand, while the other hand works deception? Let us not let down our guard. And guard your tongue, lest it betray you." Though not knowing why, she did not wish Umi to endanger himself.

Umi had to speak or burst, for gratitude stirred his heart: "Zima, thank you—for your forbearance." But when your words condemn you, why make matters worse? He paused, afraid. "No, I must say more. In this matter we must see. If he neither hates us nor cares for us, then why from Earth does he not release us, unmindful of where we roam?"

"Isn't it told of the northern Guardians, that under their kingdom, for offering different counsel the Fire Bringer was hated by the Chief Guardian, locked into his humanoid shape, chained, and his soul painfully riven each evening? Yet that after many long years of lament, the Guardian himself came to see and to share the Fire Bringer's concern for the secondborn, namely that they must have the freedom to err? And then, with his hatred towards him over, did he not release him? Why does Usen tell parables against his people, if not to teach?

“Yet I stand in doubt, for if after hatred can come release by a Guardian, why then are we not released from the Eighth Law, if the Guardian of Guardians had hatred for us, but has it no more?”

“That I cannot say”, replied Zima cautiously. It was perhaps a puzzle too dangerous to solve. Was there not safety in blindness? Nor were they called upon to see. Fate had been kind to them, perhaps. In the name of the Kingdom of Night, they had infiltrated the enemy’s camp. It was a golden opportunity to uncover the deep plot of Usen their enemy. Yet why did he suffer them to spy upon him?

Forty weary days dragged by. Still Moysh and I’hoshua had not returned. Many had given up hope. Search parties had not been sent out, simply because Lahveh had threatened to kill anyone who violated the exclusion zone. Fear of him prevented any rescue or recovery attempt. Forty very long days. Much had happened in the camp, but there was still no sign of the wanderers. It was surely time to move on. Had they not been promised a fertile land to the east, and not the barren backside of a wilderness?

Capitalising on uncertainty and discontent, Yanness and Yambress soon came to represent many of the elders and the Ivrim rank and file. Plainly the people of Khem admired them as having borne high office before the face of Pharaoh. Representing these foreigners, too, they had an open door to Arawon. They always spoke smoothly to him, assuring him that though his little brother should respect him more as his more talented big brother, they at least respected him, fanning his vanity with false fire.

So when they approached with a delegation of elders and tribal priests, Arawon was ready to hear and to heed. Approaching, Yanness bowed low in veneration: “Hail, my lord Arawon, chief among the Ivrim, chosen people of the most high. Moysh your brother appointed you to stay among the camp, lest he perish on the mountain. Behold, the mountain is still covered with a veil of mourning, and the clouds wail as if in weeping. Is that not a sign that Moysh your brother is dead?”

“Yes,” added Yambress, “surely Lahveh speaks not unto you, for he tests you. For at the Yamsuf, your brother failed to use what he already had, to part the waters and to move forward. You too are tested. Can you not succeed, where your younger brother has failed? Can you not take up

your staff, and lead your people to their safe home? Why stand still, waiting for deliverance, when you can go forward?"

Thus they spake unto Arawon, and Arawon heeded. *Isn't it likely enough*, he asked himself, *that my brother and I'hoshua have fallen foul to the ways of the wild?* If Jahveh had promised to protect Moysh, Moysh wouldn't have taken I'hoshua as a guard. He—Arawon—had felt that only one guard, was far too few. He now wished that he had spoken up at the time. For besides mishaps of slip and slide, there were wild animals which would feast upon the flesh of man.

Yanness and Yambress were egging him on. He looked doubtful, but resisted their temptation. "Yet if I command my people to rise and go forth, there will be conflict in the camp. Many of my people will follow any divinity, but many of my tribe will only follow the one who delivered us from the hand of Pharaoh. My own sister led the singing of his praise. Will she now gayly sing my song, leaving behind the bones of our brother to bleach on the barren mountainside?

"Besides, until Lahveh arises from his stony throne, we dare not seek for those bones, so as to take them into the Land of Promise, and to lay them there in honour alongside the embalmed body of he who took us into Khem, even our ancestor Iakov."

Arawon hesitated, but Yanness was always ready with a quick reply. "Arawon, should the dead bury the dead? Which is more important? To deliver your living people unto life, or to delay and mourn a congregation of the dead? You should grieve greatly for your dead brother. But would you have his efforts come to naught, and perish with your people at the foot of this hill, even as slaves of Khem are often buried at the feet of their masters? Will that not grieve him? Will he find rest for his soul, if your people do not find the promised rest?

"Therefore to free his soul, you must forsake his body. For have the wise not said, *They who live may seek for the dead, but they who die will find them?* If you live, may you not return in strength to seek for his bones? Then will your beloved sister not sing again?"

"And," quickly added Yambress, "as for the people, why not give them what they seek? For by my counsel, lord, you will cast of metal a glorious idol to house the spirit of Lord Lahveh. And whether or not he, or some other power, does deign to dwell therein and to travel with us in style and high honour, at least to those who honour his name it will be as if

he walks with us. For those who care not who among the powers walks with us, it will be as if an unknown divinity abides with us."

"But be sure," counselled Yanness, "to dedicate the idol to he who delivered us from the hand of Pharaoh. For you at least know that it was Iahveh who delivered us from Pharaoh, and to him you must be true, whether he or another walks with us."

Thus it was decided, that for the good of the camp, the last will of Moysh would be fulfilled by the hand of Arawon, who would deliver the people from the Wilderness of Hoo-rebin, and into the Land of Chenán, flowing with the smoothness and sweetness of abundance.

The following day, Arawon issued an order to his people, that before upping stakes and moving on, they must contribute pure gold to a common purse, for the crafting of an idol to honour the Power that delivered them. Next day, joyous to be moving on, golden jewellery was heaped at his feet, and strewn at a hastily built furnace, where smithies stood with him. By the hand of Arawon was the gold thrown into the furnace, and by the hand of the craftsmen was an image of a bull crafted from the forge, and set before the people.

In truth, Arawon had his doubts as to his honesty. Yet putting all doubts aside, he offered all the religious trimmings, perhaps to remind the people of Iahveh—*let them look at the bull and think of he who rescued us from the horns of our dilemma*. Mass management was a tricky thing. To avoid trouble, you had to fool all of the people some of the time. To reward their worship of Iahveh the Bull, he promised a bull-party for the very next day. It sounded all well and good, but some, particularly those of his own tribe, slept uneasily that night.

The next day began well. Animals were slaughtered to make merry, and roast meat was a welcome supplement to their diet. Many jars of wine, bought by blood from Khem, were cracked open for the tribal leaders, in festive mode of departure. Many people broke forth into snatches of song. Miryam was urged to sing her song again. She modestly declined. Arawon saw her sitting uneasily. He didn't press her to sing. Ignoring her doldrums, many arose and danced for joy. Tomorrow they would be gone from this gloomy land. Drink to life. And then into this party stormed none other than Moysh. Thunder was upon his brow, and his eyes blazed with unquenchable fire.

Those few who saw, for the most part stilled their clamour—perhaps they after all had gone a bit too far. For some, the wine spoke folly, and they begged him to join them in a drink—*one for the road*, they slurred in pally tones. To them he seemed annoyed, when he should be amiable, for they were all chums, and it was a swell party, and all the divinities were cordially invited, including his. *Bottoms up.*

Many have said that Lahveh proved to be a jealous divinity, a party-pooper. Looking back, we can see that he was neither a divinity, nor prone to jealousy. But then, as now, he was prone to discipline students and subjects. He tried to teach dull students how to enjoy true life. And for that high aim, he simply had to remove the unruly from the classroom. Merely bending over for the swish of a cane, wouldn't help much. Their expulsion was by death's door. Yes, those who could not be taught, he would cast into prison beyond this world to await their final assessment. Those who could be taught, learnt a lesson by the expulsion of their classmates, a lesson many rejected.

Moysh had no time for the hail-fellow-well-met of drunken sinners, and swept them aside. At least one now lay low in the dust, muttering to no one in particular, *I don't think that fellow likes me, hic.*

Sternly, Moysh ordered his men to go through the camp, killing any man who refused to repent of their sin, all who refused to see that they had been in gross violation of the now annulled covenant, spiritual infidels. That was done. Hundreds paid for their rebellion with death. Many assuming themselves to be in the safe majority, refused to yield up their new found freedoms. Alas! Many fought to live in slavery to the Dark; in dark slavery they died. But for now, the rot had been stopped.

That evening, the camp seemed hushed and still—if you ignore the weeping of widows and orphans. Moysh assembled his men. “Today, so far as lies within me under Lahveh, I declare you and our tribe set apart for special service unto Lahveh. For behold, he is well pleased with you. But be careful in all of your ways to acknowledge him, and to obey his commands, for from whom much is received, much is required.”

Weary, but with a sense of satisfaction, they bowed low before him. Looking back, it had been a bloody business, and they felt unclean. And yet does not the surgeon wash blood from their hands, having

saved a life; had they not cut out cancerous cells, to save the body? Still, it hadn't been at all nice—if you like the job, don't do it.

The next morning there were hangovers, and the camp hung around the mountain base, shameful heads hanging low. Burial squads got busy. All were in sober mood. But Moysh, having returned one day, was gone the next. That day, Moysh stood before Iahveh once more upon Mount Synaj. Arawon had begged him not to leave, lest fresh rebellion break out. Though a forest fire be quelled, cannot rogue flames reignite unheralded?

"Arawon," he had replied, "before I returned, Iahveh showed me that only by my commitment would he spare any within our camp. He actually challenged me as to whether I wished to be burdened by the whole camp, or simply to lead our own family into the Land of Blessing. Yes, we could have had it easy.

"But it came unbidden into my mind, that it was he, not I, who had led them from slavery, and that ultimately they were his, not mine. And I chose commitment to him; I choose the burden, the heavy yoke, for by his words I see that I bear the people as a witness to the world to his wonders. Moreover, having let him down before, I am not minded to do so ever again. And by my choice, he has stayed his full wrath.

"But don't you see, that unless more is done in contrition, that the camp is lost? The fire of rebellion still smoulders. It has not learnt its lesson. You proved to be a reed swayed by the wind. Left to lead as a shepherd, you followed the sheep, letting them run wild as a laughingstock to the nations. And to you pressure might yet be brought to bear, to arise and lead the rebellious, doomed for destruction. You yourself have been under the doom of death. Behold, the messenger of death has passed over—this time. But beware, lest sin darken your door once more.

"And so for you and for the people, I must go back to plead, and be seen to plead. For in mercy he may restore unto us the covenant of promise."

And so Moysh had gone again upon the mountain. There he offered more. Whereas before he had been offered safety and rich blessings for he and his family, now he offered his life and theirs for the community: *spare them, or don't spare me.* Now *that* was dedication. And Iahveh replied that the guilty would still be cut out from the flock—yea, he would strike down the guilty as wolves. And thousands more descended into death, before the people broke camp.

Two Books has Usen for his Children. One is the Mortal Book; one is the Immortal Book. Some names are erased from the former, sooner than they otherwise might be, sometimes even by his hand. Yet some whose names he has erased from that Book, he writes into the Immortal Book—though not all. Though errant Arawon would be gathered to his people, will his name not live on in the immortal Book of Life? And so too might Mortal Wolves, yet be named within his Immortal Flock? Does he not see the inner heart, and judge between inwardly sheep, and inwardly wolves, even if in mortal life the former have appeared as wolves, and the latter have appeared as sheep?

But whatever fate might await beyond the Great Door, his wrath now smouldered. After the purge, the word percolated around the camp, that the intimacy they had had with Lahveh, had withered and died. They had to admit, that all too often they had spurned his love, gone too far to be forgiven.

After that period when Moysh had needed uninterrupted weeks aside to be taught upon the mountain, the mountain had been desacralised, left to be just a mountain again. For shorter meetings, Lahveh continued to speak with Moysh face to face inside their special meeting tent outside of the camp. There, Moysh could only see him darkly, as through a veil. There though, the camp could still access their divinity when Moysh was about, and from there, Moysh told them things which had been discussed—or commanded. Many had listened to Moysh, but as his words spread throughout the camp, so also did confusion.

The word was that Moysh had still had to plead on their behalf. Some said that at one point, Lahveh had only promised to travel with Moysh, but that Moysh had begged that unless Lahveh promised to travel with the whole camp, he himself would rather stay with the camp where they were. Honouring such a man, Lahveh had, apparently, revealed more about what his relationship with them meant: awesome goodness, graciousness, and compassion. Moysh's face had positively glowed, but the camp realised that for them, there would ever be a veil between his vision, and theirs.

The word was that they would still be led into Chenán, although Lahveh would no longer live with them. That figured. Perhaps—they being such a wayward people—he had decided it safest for them, to

keep his distance. Rumour had it that given too much grief, he'd send a special envoy, some lesser Guardian—maybe an aggelos, a direct agent. Some such had been already promised them, to lead them into a cleansed Chenán. Some reckoned that if they gave the envoy too much grief, he too would hand them down to a lesser agent.

So, if Iahveh himself would remain close enough to bless, he would remain close enough to curse—his patience might be running thin. *Closeness is danger*, whispered some. *He'll still help us*, added others.

I'hoshua, the young assistant, had been put in charge of the tent security. It was a glorious tent, in which for a fleeting time, the prophetic vision still flowed to those who sought to know. After the golden bull, it doubled as a safe place outside of the camp, where Moysh and Iahveh met undisturbed, and where Moysh still mediated on behalf of the people.

But a larger project had now begun, in the form of a more permanent tent. This would be a sacred tent of meeting for priests, and would supersede the prophetic tent in regards to public access, changing the focus. For well over a millennium, such large and portable tents had been built by Khem, so were nothing new in themselves, but were a first for the Ivrim. This large rectangular tent would be set within a portable enclosure, the latter being a security fence to keep outsiders safe from sacred contamination, and insiders safe from secular contamination. Yes, Arawon's calling would soon supersede the special calling of Moysh. And perhaps that was right. Perhaps the people now needed the priestly more than the prophetic.

That tent for Arawon would be priestly, rather than prophetic, even as his calling was priestly, not prophetic, a service of washing away sins, of offering fellowship with Iahveh and refreshing it. Indeed Moysh, having thoroughly rebuked the people and made them swallow the bitterness of their golden bull, had upon their repentance, agreed with them about constructing such a sacred tent. Actually the planning details had been one of the reasons he had been so delayed, for Iahveh had patiently underlined the importance of such a tent by mapping out its very minutiae.

And it would be large, large and heavy, and twelve oxen would have to haul the convoy of carts whenever the people moved camp. It

would be costly, crowd-funded by rich offerings from the willing. Even on the move it would be holy—a miniature Mount Synaj on wheels, plus one or two extra-holy items. Indeed, being too holy for mere oxen, such items must be carried on sanctified shoulders.

It would make quite a procession. Overall it would be a community pivot, an *axis mundi* linking chosen vassals with suzerain, for this suzerain aimed to live with his vassals in order to bless them. If they messed up, he aimed to restore the relationship—if they allowed—and to enrich their lives—if he were allowed.

But for the sake of the vine—as we may picture these people—he was fully prepared to prune off any branches which endangered the central life. Would that vine ever produce a wine for the wider world? For now, Iahveh’s new tent would express his hiddenness and mercy, for in hiddenness and mercy he would journey with them undercover.

Funny in a sad kind of way, that the lack of any visual of Iahveh—and of Moysh—had been the very reason which had inclined his people to have created their own makeshift visual to travel with. They had simply wished to see someone higher than them; to know that help was at hand. But impatience, such impatience.

But then, hearts like murder will out, they say. Iahveh had seen the Golden Bull of the heart, the Khem within. Anyway, that was then. They now put their wealth and their skills to good use. Both wealth and skill had come from Khem. And by the standards of the day, those skills of Khem were technically cutting edge.

Perhaps now they hoped to kiss and make up, hiding the dark recesses of their inner hearts. Ironically, the holy things were made by unholy people. And what strange holiness. The furniture of the tent within the outer fencing—the *tabernacle*—was all built to Iahveh’s design, loaded with deep-seated symbolism. But by and large, even the builders failed to see with the inner eye of the spirit.

The two vampires watched from a safe distance, until the tremors had subsided. It seemed clear to them that they were accepted, as not of the camp, but in the camp. Still, they could not afford to take liberties. They were, after all, a people apart, the Night People. And thus as spectators, they continued to watch in awe unimpeded.

Strange things went on in the camp. For instance, the meeting tent of Moysh had an unearthly glow descend whenever Usen followed Moysh into the tent, as if a light went on whenever he entered the room. Those were times of danger.

Even Yanness and Yambress were impressed, though with fear, not with goodness. For the Kingdom of Darkness feared that the plan of Usen might soon bring forth the Seventh Age, and diaboloi had long ensnared the willing minds of the human magicians, minds that had bought their power and sold them their souls as life-slaves. The design of the diaboloi was simple—undermine. Yanness and Yambress had gotten close to Arawon, too close. Did Usen not see this danger?

The word which kept coming back to Umi, was Grace. Grace to bother with the secondborn. Grace to bother with a runtish subsection of mankind. Grace to stick with it, once it proved its runtiness. Grace even from Zima—and that was all against the rules of Darkness. Why then no grace from Usen towards all vampires? Or, was it just possible that Usen *had* extended grace to them, grace unrecognised, even as the Ivrim often failed to recognise his forbearance and design for them?

The following day, Yambress sought them out. Yanness had also gone looking for them, but it was a big camp and not always so easy to find anyone, so they had sought in different directions. Having called them aside, he spoke in hushed tones, lest any who might walk by might overhear.

“Umi, Zima, we are all from the inner circle of Pharaoh, all exiled for our failure to control the magic of Moysh. Now harken! We of the North and South have already caused deadly dissension within this wretched camp. We all see that this divinity, strong without rival and shining with a fell light, is not soft to discipline its people. Now how say you, that together we encourage deeper dissension? For if his anger breaks out against them again, might they who survive not return to Pharaoh, and be entangled again with the yoke of bondage? And if they return, will we not be welcomed back with open arms to our former posts?”

It was obvious that these evil Winds wished to be further away from Lahveh, and resented roughing it in the backside of a wilderness, prone to raiding parties. Pah! Pathetic little magicians, ever so easily

swayed by the Necros, selling their souls simply to feed their bellies and to amuse their vain bosses. And now these two floundered like fish out of water. Khem, having spat them out, now seemed to them the better option. Besides, whereas in Khem they had always enjoyed the favour of women, here the women kept aloof. Pathetic little men! Neither Umi nor Zima could see why the secondborn always seemed so tied up with those of the complementary sex. Vampires had no real appetite for pair-bonding or family-bonding, nor for home comforts. For some reason, Usen had planned that such vermin should develop needs for one another, companion commitment unto death. But these two Winds seemed game to annoy Usen, thinking him to be merely a divinity named Lahveh. Indeed as Lahveh he touted himself as just another power, by insisting that he was to be the Ivrim's exclusive power. What was his game? And should they join Yambress' little game? Quickly they agreed their position telepathically. Then they spoke aloud to their former colleague.

Umi began. "Yambress, seven times have these people rebelled against Lahveh. First at the Yamsuf, when they feared to be slain by Pharaoh. Next, when they spat out water bitter to the taste. Next, when they hungered and their stomachs raged. Next, when they scorned the order of Moysh not to store the strange food. Next, when they scorned the order of Moysh to store the strange food. Next, when they sorrowed for water. Next, when they sorrowed for Moysh.

"Lahveh has taken some to task, and summoned some to himself beyond this world. And yet he has not abandoned them entirely as his flock, forbearing their fickleness. Wherein he has shown both softness and sternness. Now, maybe if we push the people into greater rebellion, verily he might not spare the rod, nor spare the child. But if without mercy, will any be spared to return to their bondage to decay, as you seek? Too much might defeat your aim to return triumphant to Pharaoh. And too much might also take from you your own lives. For think you that Lahveh, having destroyed his own, will leave the instigators free to return to Khem? I, Umi of the East Wind, have spoken."

"And I, Zima, shall speak. Yambress, you and your comrade Yanness, seek to return to Khem, where great honour and adulation shall await you, if you succeed. But we, the Winds of East and West, seek not to return to Khem, nor do we seek ill against this people. Therefore, why

should we join with you in stirring up their destruction, risking needlessly our own?

“Behold, Pharaoh has surely sought our destruction, in spite of our long and loyal service to the Land of Khem. However, here neither Moysh nor his master, have sought to do us ill, seeming content that we walk with the camp in peace. If they have done us no wrong, why should we seek to do them wrong to please Pharaoh, who has done us wrong? I, Zima of the West Wind, have spoken.”

Yambress was at a loss for words. He and Yanness had assumed that the East and West Winds would yearn to go back to Khem, forsaking the dangers of Lahveh, for the glories of Khem—the heat of the fire, for the cool of day. Of course they knew that stirring up the Ivrim to stir up Lahveh, was risky, but they thought it worth the risk, to gain Pharaoh’s favour. But the East and West, seemingly, did not think Pharaoh’s favour at all worthwhile. Indeed, they seemed almost content to dwell with a barbaric backside people in a backside desert, under some backside power of unimaginable power and purpose. Might East and West pose a danger to North and South?

“Then I call you both *fools*”, spat out Yambress. “For what, though there be safety here? Are there not yet riches and glory in Khem, and pleasures at Pharaoh’s right hand? Is great gain not worth small risk? Why should we, when the world should be at our feet, sit at the feet of the world? Is that not undignified? We should command, not serve a flea-ridden flock, wanderers from the fold of mighty Pharaoh.

“As to this flea-bearing flock, you speak of seven rebellions so far. Yes, but why so many? Because this rabble are unhappy with their divinity, both for pulling them out of sweet land—having first made them stink in the nostrils of Pharaoh—and for his wayward leading of them within this unholy wilderness. Have they not counted themselves as dead, having forsaken Pharaoh? Have they not praised Pharaoh’s food, even preferring to have died amidst plenty, rather than having been forced into famine? And if they see so clearly the blessings of Khem, why are you so blind, that you choose not to go back?”

Zima’s gaze was distracted. A young woman of the Ivrim had just run by singing a happy song. Come to think of it, that surely was Shira, a young woman who seemed to hit it off with I’hoshua, special assistant to Moysh. Perhaps she was running to him in girlish giggles? It

mattered not, perhaps, but happiness was not a thing all that common among the vampires, which was a sad thing. But then, the Children of Usen were naive, and knew not the ways of the world, the world of taking without giving. What could they learn, in such a short span of mortal life? Simpletons were they who enjoyed Usen.

Then she looked at Yambress. "I would not learn wisdom from fools", she replied. "What blessing was Khem to these sheep? It kept their skin on their backs, true, but fleeced them in life and butchered them in premature death. And what blessing to Iahveh are these sheep? Needless is their waywardness. And so I marvel the more that this divinity does not efface them from the face of the earth. Are they not sustained? Are they not fat and flourishing, with their waybread and their water? Yet they are as blind to blessings now, as to cursings before, and you would instruct us to go to these sheep, consider their ways, and be wise?" She took a deep breath as if such thinking was too foolish to consider. Vampires need breath even as they need sleep, which is to say, never, but feign both to eyes that are dull. Her breath spoke volumes.

Umi spoke next: "Yambress, we seek not the wealth of Khem. We, who were counsellors to Pharaoh, can yet find prestige among these people, or if not with them, later with others of ancient lands. We will not endanger this journey, and therein our lives, in hopes of going back. Nor need you. For if we stay and are accounted friends, may we not leave with riches, even as these people left Khem with riches, though they were accounted enemies?"

Yambress knew when it was wise to quit. Bowing low, he shrugged his shoulders, turned, and walked quietly away. None had overheard their conversation, not even that slip of a girl who sped by. The job still had to be done, but would have to be done alone by Yanness and he. He saw Yanness approaching, looking thoughtful.

Yes, it might even be that they could spread dissention in the name of Umi and Zima, and so reap any gain without paying any price. Pharaoh would know that North and South had always been true to him, but would think that they had left to uncover the plots of East and West. A cock and bull story, but Pharaoh feasted on the lives of animals, and the lies of man. Could Umi and Zima be blamed for some plot to align with the Nine Bows? Yes, he and Yanness would stick the knives in, if they could.

Within the camp a sweet young woman had met a diligent man. He smiled as she approached, for she was Shira, daughter of Naason, and was the girl he hoped to marry. There is no greater wonder than the way the face of a young woman fits in a man's mind, and stays there, and he could never tell you why; it just seems it was the thing he wanted. Her song was of the rising of the sun, as if verily she was as the lark of the dawn.

Now the most plaintive of songs may sound as a sweet siren, to those bewitched by Venus, yet even the dullest adjudged her singing to be better than good: I'hoshua adjudged it to be even better. And, he said, if it was bewitchment, well, blest was enslavement under such enchantment. For such is the wonder of love between man and woman, and blest be they who neither wrongly take advantage of, nor are taken advantage by, the other. And blest are the ties that bind the heart in true love.

He had met her while the people had waited at the Yamsuf, who for the better part had been frozen by fear. He had been moving around the camp, encouraging the people to be brave and not fainthearted. *Had not Iahveh stirred up Pharaoh to cast them out, and his people to lavish them with riches long overdue them? Would he who had thus brought them out, not deliver them from the hand of Pharaoh, and that not by death?*

Many had stood trembling in despair, unable to move and calling upon death to take them home. There he had stumbled upon Shira, mocking the cowards one and all. Yeah, she had teased even her own mother and father, for could not he who had led Yosef into Khem, lead his son out from Khem? In her he had found a kindred spirit.

Now he met her with a smile and a holy kiss, and cared not that they were watched. In the ways of romance, he was late in years. Many sweet names could he name, of those who had entranced him in years gone by—names, but alas never *his* name. But Shira was here; Shira was real; Shira understood; her name could be his. Happiness and holiness was their guide star, their watchwords. It was the way of

their people that boys and girls would pair off, sound out each other, and then ask their parents to bless the match.

There were formalities within their culture for easy transition between extended families of both girl and boy, bride and groom, womanhood and manhood. But before any man said, “Get her for me”, he had usually spent time in getting to know her, or else guidance had come through other channels, such as through prayer or parental advice. For taking on another human being for life, was a big ask. Before death, only infidelity—itself a death—permitted covenant termination without residual marital obligations to the former spouse.

At least in theory. Too many men were mindless of such sanctity, and prone to wander, ignominiously putting aside one spouse to gain another. I'hoshua despised such frivolity with fellow human beings—wives weren't mere objects to ditch at will, and life meant life.

Now they held hands, and sat together a little in silence. The camp had changed much since crossing the Yamsuf. Still, not all was well. Clearly many still had fears about the future, even if trying to conceal their doubts. Blood had been shed; skin had been bruised. An up and coming generation were not best advised by the older, and were the hope of the people. Perhaps they would not fail as had their parents. Perhaps crocodiles might weep. Shira had the gift of insight, if not of foresight. She was an astute observer of persons, and a lady of great faith in their leader.

“My love,” she said, “we have suffered much for our sins, and I fear that more sin and shame will come, for we carry them in our hearts. Will we ever be purified, and enter the Land of Joy? But whether we live or die, Lahveh's will be done. Oh, we are such a fickle people that I could pull my hair out at times. And of all the foreigners who have joined us—they and their children”—she looked quickly around—“I doubt most the magicians of Khem.” I'hoshua gave her a squeeze of reassurance.

“Dearest,” he replied, “for the most part they seem to me to be quiet within the camp. True, at one point they offered Moysh their mystic talents, but he turned them down flat. Indeed, why should he seek wisdom for the free, from those who had enslaved them? Moreover, they're not committed to the worship of Lahveh. But it seems to me that

they're content to walk with the camp in silence, happy to be free of the wrath of Pharaoh, whose anger they have earned."

"Yes," said Shira, "but I have been watching them. Oh no," she added, seeing his look of concern, "not that they would notice me. Only at a safe distance, undercover. I have seen furtive looks on their faces when they meet to talk, as if they would not be overheard. A few times I've managed to loiter quite close. Why, just now, for instance, three of them were in some deep discussion out of earshot. They kept glancing around, as if to be sure that none overheard them. I was edging closer, when I looked behind and there was that odious man, Yanness, watching me."

"Be careful Shira." I'hoshua would risk himself before risking her. "We don't really know what they're like, but they are powerful, used to getting their own way—though for now they follow our way. Moysh gives them the benefit of the doubt, but like me fears that they could fall to murder. If they suspect you, you could be in grave danger. And yet we cannot in good faith expel them from the camp, without proof of illwill."

I'hoshua sat silent again, holding her hand. He marvelled that she didn't seem as nervous for herself, as he was for her. No, she was made of stern stuff. He felt that Lahveh smiled, and gave her a tick of approval, as if she would do for I'hoshua, and he for her, but I'hoshua knew that theirs was the final choice.

He couldn't help but to like her. Asking himself whether he could live with her for life, he answered, Yes. Was Yes not a definition of man-woman love? And probably like him, she'd fear more for him than he would for himself.

Still, they both had jobs to do, and could not afford to fear overmuch for their own mutual wellbeing. The community mattered more than any individual. Even Moysh would be happy to die to save the camp, if the camp would walk the way of Lahveh. A faithless camp might be better off dead. Ah, she was a staunch woman of firm and fit faith.

Weighing carefully his words, he began again: "Shira, as you have begun, so you must continue, I think. May Lahveh guide and guard you; may the aggelois watch over you. Only be both careful and courageous. Starting from tonight, I shall set a discreet guard around your tent, just to be on the safe side.

"I agree with you. We must get to the bottom of this, and if we perish, we perish. If they're conspiring against the camp, we must discover what

they're planning to do. For though Lahveh is our chief shepherd, he expects enough sense from his sheep to stay away from wolves, and not to eat bitter blades. And it is better to ward by the sword, than to wield the shield; to fall not, than to be lifted up."

Long they sat and chatted, each enjoying the other in touch and talk. Others milled around them unobserved. He parted with a tender kiss to her head, with the promise that before nightfall he would seek his family's blessing for their marriage. And if that was acceptable to all immediate parties—and why should it not be?—they could prepare for their wedding. There was still some saved wine in the cart from Khem, originally brought for special festivity. Sure, it was to be drunk judiciously, but they surely need not be without. And any day they might meet traders of wine, and buy more.

But wine. Now, what did that remind him of? Ah yes, as he walked away, he fleetingly recalled that an elder named Jemali had wandered from the camp dead drunk, and had died alone of exposure—or so it had been told. To he who had stolen it from the wine cart, it must have been like the venom of serpents, the deadly poison of cobras.

Oh yes, the pallor of the body had been unusual, and some had pontificated that Lahveh had smitten him down for his theft. Was Lahveh really like that, I'hoshua wondered? Some said that while Lahveh was a hedonist at heart—wishing his people fullness of joy—nevertheless he punished pleasures wrongly taken at the right time, or rightly taken at the wrong time. But wine for their wedding? Why, that would be the rightly taking at the right time.

Soon Moysk heard that his young apprentice was betrothed, and that the wedding would soon take place. That at least was a bit of good news. He himself was sad that his beloved Zephora seemed to be slipping away from him, worsening every day. It was a judgement on her, for she had supported the Golden Bull.

On this, Lahveh had been silent. On this, Moysk had to work out his own understanding. His own tribe had struck down many, but many more had been struck down by Lahveh. His brother Arawon had deserved to die, but for now had not been struck down—Lahveh could postpone punishment. On the other hand, his wife had been struck down—Lahveh could preponer.

But the fact that she lingered at death's door, allowed her to set her living house in order, and to reflect on what had been, on what was, and on what was to be. She, daughter of a pagan priest, now reflected on Lahveh, the divinity of the Ivrim, who had delivered them from Khem with a mighty hand. The fact that he had welcomed other peoples, also spoke to her heart, as had the fact that he had spoken clearly to her through that mountain storm, shortly before meeting Arawon. Alas, Arawon's smooth talk had deceived her, tempting her with her past, and she had been blindly willing to leave behind Moysh's mortal body unburied and to follow a bull, solely to escape the wilderness. Who, she wondered, had deceived Arawon?

She saw her own folly, and that some justified pruning had been done, and that she was allowed to linger on the vine a while longer. She saw that if let off, even now she might become loyal to Lahveh, and she sensed that somehow Lahveh knew that. Still, she had to die sometime, and now was as good a time as later. She saw too that he wished to speak to his people through her death, and that a bright future awaited her when she went to her ancestors long dead, even unto Avraam. And as she lay there reflecting, a vision of what lay beyond was given unto her, and from her was given unto Moysh, who sat quietly beside her.

He listened, and yet he was sad. Certainly not for her sake. After all, not even she was sad for her sake. No, even she was sad about her dying for his sake. And why not? For she would gain glory through her death, but he would lose her to death and be diminished. So it was, that for his sake she urged him to remarry upon her passing. For why should his heart be buried with the body which had been hers? Indeed, she urged him to marry her handmaiden, a black woman, who by the colour of her skin stood out from among the paler Ivrim, and stood out honourably in many ways.

Before many more days, Zephora had died. Soon, Moysh followed his heart, and Zephora's advice, and wed once more. That same day, I'hoshua had wed Shira. At long last for him, his man-woman love in heart, had become a wedded wife in life. He, a romantic at heart, could settle down, perhaps raise a family. Nights too were brighter. Many of the tribal elders had rejoiced at this double wedding, but not all of his people were best pleased for Moysh.

For there was Miryam the prophet, gift from Lahveh and beloved sister. Oh yes, for I'hoshua she was undoubtedly well pleased. But when it came to her youngest brother, she had begged him to cast out the handmaiden, who displeased both her and Arawon her brother. After all—she had said—surely Moysh deserved a higher class woman than a cast-off slave, and at least a maiden from his own people! And since Miryam and Arawon were two of the three main leaders, their animosity against the poor woman was as an uphill struggle to the newlyweds.

Moysh sighed whensoever he thought about it. He had had some stick before about his first wife. But his life had to go on, and his second wife comforted him for the loss of his first wife, who she too had loved. *But woe is me—thought Moysh—for am I not the most miserable man in all the world, attacked from every side?* His lot was a miserable one. It was a highly difficult job, seemingly unmanageable and certainly stressful, his back against the wall—or to the lash.

Miryam felt pretty lousy too. Both she and Arawon were wondering whether they were really getting the recognition they deserved. Her youngest brother, whom she had saved at risk to her life, had supplanted her. It didn't seem right. Yes, he was a great man. Yet at the same time, he was given to rage, to self-pity, and to inner doubt. A dreadful thought flickered through her mind, that perhaps the Darkness was close. *Is sin crouching at my door? Am I craving power?* Then she laughed it off, dismissing the whole idea as nonsense. It just wouldn't do, for to accept it was to accept that she herself had a pride issue, and that was totally unacceptable. No, best blame her brother and the fickle people for casting her from limelight into shadow.

Zima and Umi looked at each other. "Well," said Zima, "so she who wrote a song of deliverance, has become enslaved to her own pride? Does she not see that she has become a puppet to the Dark Side?"

"Yes," replied Umi, "though these people have access to much Light within their minds, there is much Darkness within their hearts. The more amazed I am that Lahveh should bother to lead them."

And they had waited to see whether he would act, or whether he would abandon such covetousness in sheer disgust. In fact as the humans bickered one day in public, Lahveh quickly stepped in and took them to one side for a private talk. Away from prying ears, he

sternly pointed out that Moysh had been *his* choice for overall leadership—who were the siblings to dispute his wisdom? Moysh had the special connection, not them. They should be more than happy with what they had, and not agitate for more. Iahveh actually raised his voice in anger.

After that little powwow, Miryam the cheerleader came out looking less than cheered. She had gone through the mill. Though previously rather good looking for her age, now her skin looked rather like one deadborn and decayed. Arawon immediately begged for forgiveness for both he and his sister. Moysh was more than happy to forgive, and prayed for his sister's speedy recovery.

And so their relationship was healed. But having offended not only her youngest brother but the whole camp, it was ruled that she who had disgraced the camp must live in disgrace from the camp for a whole week, peripheral life until her skin returned to normal.

"Again it is seen," commented Umi, "that though Iahveh might be pushed away, yet if they repent he is willing to let bygones be bygones, and to re-establish covenant love towards them." And Zima frowned.

After Miryam was restored, the Sheep People moved eleven days north and a little east, well into the Paranu Desert. That was a strategic location, from which to make a surprise attack into their promised land. Paranu was not without incident, and I'hoshua again proved himself to be a fell warrior.

But things had settled down, when once more Moysh made a beeline to I'hoshua and Shira's tent. "Now, by the grace of Iahveh, we'll soon get ready to break into the land of Chenán, which is promised to us. Shira, I hope you'll let me borrow your husband for a while?"

"Yes of course, my lord", she replied with a smile. She was not like Miryam, and had always been grateful for what she had from Iahveh's hand. Even for her husband, she was content that he sought no more than the part assigned to him by their overlord. That he had already been given high honour, was wonderful, but it had not been sought. Contentment, it was said, was great gain. And Iahveh had appointed Moysh, so if Moysh asked for her husband's help, she and he would be honoured to give it.

"You don't wish to know what for?" asked Moysh.

“Nay my lord, for I trust your judgement. We both do. But,” she added with a merry twinkle in her eyes, “if you wish to tell me, I’d love to know.” Moysh returned her smile. Oh, how he wished that all his people would be like her. Life would be so much easier.

He looked lovingly at the happy couple, and mused that he’d easily remember their wedding anniversary. Marriage was a force for great good, and he had been blessed by two good women. I’hoshua was obviously a man of good discrimination.

“As you know, I urged the camp leaders to march without further ado, and claim the land promised to us. But they have basically refused to budge unless we send out a reconnaissance team, offering terms of peace. Anyway, I spoke with Lahveh, and he agreed that special representatives may be sent to see the lie of the land, though the land is sickened by sin. Still, our tribal elders wish to know if the locals are happy to let us in without a fight, as Lahveh’s people. We’ll give them a fair go. But if we must fight, as I think we must, well, we might be a little better prepared.”

I’hoshua looked troubled: “My lord, for my part I stand ready to enter the land on Lahveh’s command. Surely the victory is his to give or to gainsay? But it is sad that the elders turn their minds to fear, and not to faith. But how shall we make those willing, who are so unwilling? Which of us can persuade them to cast fear aside, if you yourself cannot convince them?” He looked up to Moysh as to a father, and felt for the pain he knew he suffered.

“As to that,” replied Moysh, “we shall try their way—to inspire them. In line with their demands, there shall be twelve agents sent, one man from each tribe. I only hope that at least seven will agree that we must enter without further delay. But you I doubt not, nor that your nickname has been prophetic. And now with the prefix of our patron, I officially rename you as I’hoshua—never shall we write of you by your old name.”

His proud father had named him *Hoshua*, a name meaning that his lad could save his people by himself. He himself had felt that that was but braggadocio, and had humbly tweaked it to proclaim himself to be but a servant of Lahveh to help save others. Some had treated his nickname as a joke. Now endorsed at the highest level, he bowed low.

It is not that his wife was not impressed, but simply that such formalities between men wasn't her thing. She was eager to press on. "What? Did Iahveh not select twelve he could count on?" asked Shira.

"No, merely twelve whom, he said, would fairly represent the will of the people. We will just have to wait and see how things will go. But come, how are things with you two?"

Shira smiled again. "I feel at last like a man," I'hoshua said to his friend. "Oh, I know I've been given a lot of responsibility since we left Khem, and all that, but as my father once said, *Marriage will make a man of you, my son*. Now I know what he meant. It's like marriage is a gateway into adult life. I guess I could have died of old age without becoming a man. I don't know what it is like with women, and they're still a bit of a mystery to me. But I'm loving it."

Shira squeezed his hand. "For my part, I'm loving it just fine", she said. "And I love to be of help to such a man. And yes, I feel completed, somehow, like together we are one person—I dunno, one unit?"

Moysch chuckled. "Maybe you should say brick and mortar, even as we used to build with. A lasting pyramid needs cohesion for life. My wife said something like that to me just the other day: *Society needs marriage; children need marriage*. It's like together we have one name. My sons seem pleased enough, to see me settled again in marriage."

Then he fell silent, as his thoughts went back to Zephora, a good woman who had once saved his life when he had blundered along. A good woman should never be afraid to put her man to rights, respecting him, yes, but not perhaps his actions or attitudes. His new wife had been her slave. In fact she was still a slave, but now to him, even as he was a slave to her.

Wasn't that what marriage was ideally, each dedicated to and belonging to the other party? Love itself was good slavery, mutual realignment, like sharing one flesh, wearing one skin, being a new identity. You didn't always like your single identity; you didn't always like your combined identity. But companionship was the goal, and a good gaol, binding both to walk together until death did part. Of course sadly slavery could be downright evil, as when tyrants were all take and no give. He'd seen enough of the bad side to last a lifetime!

Unbeknown to them, Zima had quietly overheard them. That was easy enough for shapeshifters. She was becoming more and more uneasy about the whole show. Assuming that his main plan was with the Sheep, was Usen on the verge of giving the people of his choice, the land of his choice? Was that part of his jigsaw?

Now, anything to disrupt his plans, seemed good to her—so long as it was done without him blaming the Night. Now, were he to blame it on the Necros—with the Necroi tracing it back to the Night—why that would be even better. She had no love for Necuratu the Dark Lord, nor for Usen the Light Lord. As a matter of fact, she had no love for anyone or anything, save for herself, and woe betide anyone who dared suggest otherwise. Love was the great enemy of the dark self.

Any pieces of Usen's puzzle coming together, must surely hasten the Seventh Age, and move towards the endgame. The vampires had been warned by prophecy—by Zalkeesh, who had tapped in to the mind of Usen himself, and seen the vision. To kill the plan stone-dead was the highest goal, but even to defer it was better than letting Usen have his own sweet way. Sabotage is so sweet. For the longer the vampires were left to themselves, the better for her: there was safety in numbers, even as a bird in a flock is likely to survive a hawk.

Yes, each vampire cared for their fellow vampires only because their fellows provided flock protection for them. Alas, vampire numbers—and power—had dwindled. For unlike the Children of Usen, they did not give birth to vampires. They could manipulate DNA code, both their own adopted code, and that of any natively biological beings, whether of the Children, or of the mere phusika of the animal kingdom. But they were spirits, and spirits don't give birth to spirits.

But if she were to act, her companion might pose a problem. He seemed to her to be edging towards heresy, the belief that Usen wasn't so bad after all. Any leniency of jailed towards jailer was perverse, a scandal to the Darkness. Darkness was itself a welcome cover, like a deliciously thick cloud between a hot blazing sun in its noontime flame. The Dawn was despised and rejected.

Darkness allowed freedom for the ego, for the strong to dominate the weak. The Necroi were wrong merely in *hating* the weak—seeking to destroy, not merely to dominate or to drain. The Night simply feasted on the weak, enjoying the upper hand. What Usen’s real intentions for the weak were, remained unclear. His children would find that out to their sorrow. But so would the vampires, for compared to him they too were weak, and one day Usen would have them at his mercy. But for now the good news was that Umi was weaker than she, and the bad news was that he was becoming weaker in the Dark Side, infecting her. What then should she do with Umi? Well, she could no longer trust him enough to work happily with him. Lest he become an enemy, he was best treated as one, perhaps eliminated.

She dug down into the darkness of her own mind, shielding herself so that no other telepath could delve within and share her thoughts. Could Usen? Probably, if he tried to. But why should he bother with her? Of course if he did, her whole idea of plotting against him would be scuppered before it could begin, and she would die. Still, she had to take some chances, and just hope for the best.

“I can certainly kill Umi myself, but he is not one to die without protest, and could damage me in the process. Why should I invite self-harm, unless he forces my hand?

“What if I invite my people to kill him by overwhelming might? But to do that I must involve my queen, or Gjaku of the Great Council, and they would have to investigate first. Could his guilt be deliberated without a whisper warning our prey that my doubts had been shared? And if he escapes, will he not seek refuge among the Dawn? Could that escalate into all-out war? To prevent that, would Umi be left unpunished? He let me down; he must be punished.

“What if Lahveh gets involved? After all, this is his camp. He leaves us alone, perhaps to tempt us. But to disrupt him just to punish Umi, might lead to a revenge attack in his malice. And if my people were involved, he might do worse to us than he did following the Nephilim War. And if I bring such vengeance on the heads of my people, what will they do unto me? No, for my sake it is best if neither queen nor council are not involved, and have full deniability. I must kill him through humans.

“What if I use mind-control? Who then would be blamed? Not my people. And perhaps not myself. Neither the Night nor the Light must

know by whose hand he has fallen. Even Gjaku might not believe that I had slain him for the greater good, for I could not prove my motives—and we are not permitted to slay our own without provable just cause. So then, there must be blood only on human hands. And by mind-control I can use the hands of the secondborn, the hands of those within this camp. They must not be those in Lahveh's favour, lest he seek me out in wrath.

"But Moysh has taught that if humans murderously take the life of their own kind, they themselves deserve their life being taken, for their victims are said to be *imagodei*, so that putting a butcher knife into a Child, is like putting it into Usen. So, if my assassins are tried as mere murderers—haters perhaps of another race—my control over them might be exposed.

"However, if I raised up an Avenger of Blood for Jemali—for did not Umi the Fool commit murder within the camp?—he would be thanked. Would Amiyèl son of Jemali, be sufficient for the task? Certainly not without my aid.

"But his mind must first believe that Umi was the murderer, and therefore he must have witnesses to back that belief. For though I could use deep control over him as a slave, such enslavement would endanger me before Lahveh, who watches over this camp. Yet how could I now falsely come forward as a witness to the murder, not having spoken of such before? And these people require at least two witnesses to a deed.

"And if Amiyèl were convinced and weaponised, I would have to first bind Umi in theodynamic cords as if he slept—until he died. Since he is of the water-clan, all should then be well, for his body would wither the same as do those of the secondborn. Then let Amiyèl be questioned. If I, who was colleague to Umi, confess that I saw him slay Jemali, would my word not be taken? As for a second witness, I could persuade someone through bribe or blackmail, to bear up my story. That should be well."

After refinements she felt easy. Her scheme should work well enough, removing a fly from the ointment. Next would come the harder task, that of upsetting Lahveh's scheme. But one problem at a time.

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The following day, Moysh had assembled a team of twelve to travel swift and sure into the land of Chenán. There they would witness how their divinity, despised in Khem, had arisen in power above all the

divinities of that land. From his time in the diplomatic service, Moysh knew that Chenán held Khem in great respect, so held her divinities in great respect: what is a country without its divinities? Since Iahveh had redeemed the Ivrim from slavery, and was heading for Chenán, maybe the Chenánites would consider making terms for peaceful coexistence, or even to resettle beyond the borders.

Of course, he knew it was possible that Khem had clammed up about the deliverance—for what country boasts in its defeats? But if the people of Chenán had heard and heeded any warning, then an easy entrance was within the bounds of possibility. But of course they would then be a thorn in their side. It would simply defer confrontation. For unless they truly bowed both to the Ivrim and to Iahveh, and exchanged their own divinities for him, coexistence could not be peaceful. And Moysh was not mandated to convert any to Iahveh, but he was mandated to welcome any who did, even if not granting full citizenship and voting rights if they joined his people.

Amiyél sat silently in his tent. With some pride, his wife watched him closely. For all too recently their father had died without honour, his body found dead of exposure alongside a cracked flagon, once host to stolen wine. Alas, that had been his undoing, and gave a new twist to the term, dead drunk. He had also let down his tribe and his son and heir. “My dear,” she asked, “are you ready for this journey? You know, I fear the worst. I feel it in my very bones. Please, stay with me, safe by my side. Why not let your brother go in your stead, like he asked?”

“Nay, I share your fears, but to naysay Moysh would be to add further disgrace to our tribe. No, whatever comes, we must put on a brave face. Besides, if we don’t antagonise these Chenánites, why should they be our enemies? Live and let live, I say.

“But Moysh has his own agenda, and he works hand in glove with our divinity. We must play along with them. Besides, who knows, maybe by some miracle the Chenánites will welcome us in on our terms? Did not Iahveh deliver us from Khem? Can he not deliver us into Chenán?”

She was not reassured: “But if it comes to fighting, are you prepared to have a hand in that?” she anxiously asked. He had no chance to reply.

“Amiyél?” called a voice from outside of the tent. Moments later Moysh popped his head in. “Ah, good man, you are ready. Well, I’ll walk with you to the meeting place, where the others should be gathered. I

must pray for you all, that you will be strong and of good courage. Remember, we cannot go back, and it's not ideal to stay where we are, so it's best to go on and gain our own land. Lahveh has said that what the Chenánites don't deserve, we need, and that it's his land to let to whom he will. So don't take no bull from them."

Amiyèl smiled a weary smile. He gave his wife a peck, tied his travel bundle onto his back, and left his tent, his nighttime failure forgotten. A few minutes later they arrived at the set meeting place. The mood was sombre; the morning was grey. Even to Moysh it was a big step, and he knelt down and looked up. "Lahveh," he beseeched, "please give these twelve leaders from the twelve tribes of Iakov, travelling mercies. May your face shine upon them; may their enemies grant them peace."

The small assembly waited in silence, awaiting the sign to move out. Suddenly the silence was broken: "My lord Moysh, pleased am I that we take no wine, lest we do not all return", piped up Yigal. That hurt, that really hurt, and Amiyèl was so deadly tired. As a man can yearnfully stretch his fingers to the warmth of the night fire, yet have them burnt, so had been his night. And does sleep come easily to singed fingers?

"Enough!" shouted Moysh, losing his cool. "You are all brothers. If you cannot treat each other with honour, then at least treat none with dishonour. And if you go forth divided, are you not likely to return divided? It is for all our people that you go to explore the land, and to judge its people. You are leading lights among your tribes. Don't let them down by infighting." It was some comfort that Moysh took his side.

Yigal fell smugly silent, having made his jibe. He had always looked down on the tribe of Amiyèl, and there was bad blood between them. His silent smirk said it all. Moysh looked around and sighed. Oh why oh why had he been put in charge of such delinquent people?

Zima, having just joined the perimeter of the gathered crowd, looked very annoyed, as if she had just lost a gold ring and found a copper one. In fact, quite a number of people had gathered. Undoubtedly many more would have gathered for the send-off, if it had been better publicised, but Moysh had wished it to be low-key, lest any ill-wishers had tried any tricks.

The Twelve Agents had to arrive without ambush at the border town, and from there to circulate around the land of Chenán before meeting up on a prearranged day to journey back. Outbound security was an

issue, for not all in the camp were of the camp. So the plan had been kept quiet; names had been kept quiet.

Zima looked cross, for she had been thwarted. For there stood Amiyèl, about to set forth. Why him of all people? Was Usen mocking her? Hopefully he was simply in the dark. She'd just have to hope that Amiyèl would return safely home, and bide her time. Umi must die.

The Twelve set off well before noon. Moysh estimated that it would probably take them about a fortnight to arrive at the heavily fortified town of Ebwon, southern entrance to a land loyal to Khem. Their journey need not detain us. Suffice it to say that the team met with but little resistance on the way. They travelled without show of wealth, but were well armed, so seeming to pose a risk of loss but not of gain. Their flea-ridden camels were not worth the risk of engagement, and there seemed no threat posed by so few.

They met with fair welcome at Ebwon, and like many travellers before and after, were free to water their camels and themselves. That night they billeted in sundry of the guest houses. They began their mission to sound out the people, and to undermine them. Most of the men took the opportunity—being away from their wives—to sound out the local women—nightly rates were cheap. Amiyel grinned to himself as he thought of his wife. Try to initiate? Fail? Be wounded? Here was uncomplicated bliss. But unbeknown to him, Ebwon was suffering a pestilence of unknown origin. Alas, death rode the nightly breezes, and cheap gains were not without high loss.

I'hoshua and Kalev were billeted in a tavern. Donatiya, sister to the landlady, sat at their table: "Good sirs, it's lovely to have you staying with us. You'll find we've all you need to make your stay nice and comfy, and I hope you'll enjoy your time here. We've plenty of good food, the meat of swine and of fowl, and grain and wine aplenty. Moreover young women sweet and fresh will soon be doing their nightly rounds, eh? They'll be more than happy to warm and entertain you this chilly night.

"I can see that you gents are from afar. Well, a little feminine company will soon revive your lagging spirits, and remind you of your wives far away, eh? As a woman myself, you know, I can tell you that your wives would wish you satisfied during your stay here. Our girls, by the way, are all at the same nightly rate—whether for long or short. We try to make choosing nice and simple at this establishment. That's fair, ain't it? But

what I say to all our guests is, that I won't stand for any damage done while the girls are under my roof. No, I make that a point of principle."

Kalev smiled. "Do you know, I've ancestors from this part of the world. Do you know the Kenisiter people?"

"Know them? Why, I'm one of them", Donatiya replied with a broad smile. "Well met, kinsman from afar. I'll tell you what, I'll throw in a girl free for you. Just for the night, mind—I'm not made of money."

Kalev chuckled aloud. "Well, what do you say to that, I'hoshua? Didn't I tell you that my people on this side, were generous to a fault? I've not had such a good offer for many a long day."

I'hoshua grinned back: "Aye, it is a fair offer, from a fair mistress of this town. And though I'd have to pay, it'd be two girls for the price of one. Alas, it's such a pity though, isn't it?"

"Why the Alas?" Donatiya smiled. "No good sirs, it's a bargain fair and square, and cheap enough for regular home comforts away from home."

"Nevertheless it is Alas!" replied Kalev with a mock sigh sandwiched between a smile, "Because, you see, our divinity simply would not take kindly to your kindly offer, temptingly tasty as it is."

Donatiya was puzzled: "Whoever heard of any divinity unhappy with their followers having a bit of harmless nighttime fun? Many encourage it. But why not worship a different one, then, I mean, at least while you're here? We've got plenty to choose from. And if you've brought yours along, why not just pop it back in its sack once it's been fed?"

The two men laughed outright at this one. It was infectious mirth, and Donatiya herself laughed gaily, oblivious to the joke. Her little daughter ran to her, tugging at her robe. "Mummy, why you laughing? Are these *funny* men?" She stared at them with her big round eyes.

"Hello, little girl," said I'hoshua, "where did you come from? And would you like to hear a story, now that you're here?"

The little girl was delighted to meet these two strange men who had made her mummy laugh. They seemed nice. Some men weren't nice, and sometimes the local girls who'd keep them company—*bed warmers* her mummy called them—would whimper a bit when they ate breakfast. They never told *her* why. It was nice to hear men laugh, and for mummy to join in.

"What's your name, little girl?" asked Kalev.

"My name is Rachaba", she said, standing up straight. "My mummy said that I'll grow up big and strong, and that I'll have an inn, and look after her and daddy. 'Cause I've got no brother, not yet, anyhow."

"Well, little Rachaba, let me tell you a story, which mummy can listen to. Although I've kinfolk around here—and you're one of them—I've got kinfolk elsewhere, too. Back home I'm a leader in my tribe, and that's only one of twelve tribes. Together, we're called the Ivrim.

"We have only one divinity, whom we call Lahveh. Now long before even I was born, he promised our great great—Oh, I don't know how many greats—grandfather, that he'd give his descendants this whole land of Chenán for our very own.

"Now during a drought, we went into Khem, saved them from starving, and shared their food. But after a long time, their bad king made us slaves. After a while, Lahveh—did I mention who he was?—came to visit. Then even all the divinities of Khem, either could not, or would not, interfere, and the king couldn't stop us from regaining our freedom, though he tried as hard as he could.

"We even met with Lahveh on our way here, and our leader speaks with him face to face. Lahveh never lives in an idol, though. I mean, he can just appear out of the blue. He can appear in a scrub bush, or rest upon a fiery mountain top, or just descend like a rainbow into a meeting tent. He never shows his face, except to our leader, a man named Moysh, and even he only sees part of it. It's too frightfully wonderful.

"In fact, that's why we laughed so gayly just now. Your mummy asked if we kept him in a sack. Nay Donatiya, it's more like he keeps *us* in a sack", said Kalev.

"That's silly," said Rachaba, "you can't fit into a sack. Mummy, these men are silly."

"Hush, Rachaba, don't be rude. These are nice men, and I'd like your daddy to hear them, too. Go and get him, will you, sweetie?" Like a gay little bird, the little girl sped away to find her daddy, and the three adults sat quietly at the table for several minutes, waiting for him.

"You know," Donatiya said in a quiet voice, "it might not be safe to talk too loudly about our land being your land. While we look to ourselves, and our different tribes get along fairly well, Khem still demands tribute from us, and has soldiers and chariots stationed in Chenán. We could house a few more folk—especially any happy to live in the highlands,

where people are scarce—but we don’t want no troublemakers. Kalev, even our tribe here wouldn’t take kindly to that.”

Quietly into that corner of the darkened room came Yassiv, father to Rachaba, husband to Donatiya. “Good sirs, I bid you welcome. My excitable child has told me just a little bit about you spinning some yarns. Now telling a story to children is one thing, but it’s best not to go giving out that this land is going to be yours, or any such nonsense. Let me tell you straight, that kind of talk won’t do you no good in this house. But come, what’s the truth of it, huh? I mean, that can’t be what you’re planning. Why, if it were, it stands to reason that you’d not be saying so, doesn’t it? So to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?”

I'hoshua spoke more quietly, while Rachaba perched happily on her father’s lap, playing with a lovely scarlet cord. “Listen, if it’s true that our divinity released us from Khem, it’s also true that all of Khem’s chariots and all of Khem’s men, can’t keep us out of Chenán. Hundreds of years ago he promised this land to us, and now he prophesies it again.

“What you do is up to you. Even over our dead bodies our people can march right in, and take the land with much bloodshed. Or, if you like, we can speak first with the leaders of the tribes here, and maybe arrange a more peaceful deal to mutual satisfaction. But if you kill us now, you’ll be the first ones killed when our people swarm in.”

“Kill you? Who spoke of killing you, my good sirs?” asked Yassiv. “No, I’d not be a party to that. Besides, you’re paying guests. But I’ll not deny that there are some who would swat you down like gnats, if they heard this kind of fighting talk. Now whether our divinities can deal with yours, I don’t know, nor do I wish to find out. But we’re putting the cart before the donkey. Pray tell us more of your story.”

And so it was that at that inn of wine and women, the fuller story was told. It was too incredible to be untrue, so truly must be credible. Yassiv and his wife and daughter listened intently without further laughter or interruption. It seemed best that their far distant cousin be an ally: “Promise us we’ll not be harmed”, they had said. Little Rachaba had sat a little afraid, goggle-eyed. At last the men retired alone for the night, to enjoy some solid sleep under a solid roof. I'hoshua had a cunningly woven scarlet cord, tied around his waist. It was a pet plaything from the little girl, given to him for being such a nice man. Secretly she planned to marry him when she grew up.

The next day all the twelve had set out for the heartlands of Chenán, travelling as far north as Rehoviin. There they spoke with the tribal leaders, and were given a guided tour of the land. The local leaders made sure to show off their military equipment, for fear can be a strong deterrent. The locals themselves were uneasy with all this talk of Iahveh, and there was some talk among them of contingency plans. What if they were invaded? The incoming people were less in number than they—at least if they all banded together against a common foe. Their war chariots should give them the tactical advantage in the valleys, but would be nigh on useless in the hill country.

That was, humanly speaking, if unaided by the divinities. Their own divinities were strong, but for all that, they had allowed Khem to have the upper hand over them. So they were not all powerful, even with a home advantage.

And into this equation came a new divinity. Only one, thank the stars, but one who had outgunned the divinities of Khem even without home advantage. Would he be as powerful in eisodus as he had been in exodus? Would it not be wiser to welcome him to their pantheon, even if he insisted on being top dog? But their divinities might punish them for such a deal.

While the envoys were with them, it was as well to send messengers to Khem, to check out the story of defeat by these Ivrim. Was it true, or was it much ado about nothing? And best to discreetly make such enquiries among the common people on the borders of Khem, without Pharaoh having to know. After all, Pharaoh might not like reminders of defeat, if rumours were really true.

In the meantime, the ambassadors were lavishly wined and dined. They spoke of options. The inhabitants could knuckle down. Well, they already did that under Khem. Why not do it under the Ivrim? Sure, it would involve some lifestyle changes, but only such changes as would bless the people. Or they could vacate the land. Khem had lost many young men and experienced warriors, in coming after the Ivrim like wolves pursuing sheep. Why should Chenán make a similar error of judgement? Why fight and die? Thus spoke the Ivrim.

The Chenánites spoke of state of the art chariots. They also had three very powerful commanders, giants in warfare, and giants in stature, warriors of the Anakin, a tribe prone to genetic mutation, what some called gigantism. This picked up a throwback fear to the Nephilim Wars of ancient history. Zima and Umi could have told the Ivrim much about those days, when Drac of the Night had created a race of giants, from mating with the maidens of the firstborn. Those had been bitter days for the Kingdom of Night.

The Chenánites introduced their giants. Now seeing such men, many of the Ivrim had second thoughts. After all, were those they saw, greater than he whom they saw not? Perhaps Moysh was pushing too far, too soon? Maybe wait a while longer? Disturbing thoughts dogged their homeward trail, but as they regrouped back in the massive city of Ebwon, the doubters soon picked up that not all doubted. For of their number, Kalev and I'hoshua seemed unfazed—“Oh the bigger they are, the harder they fall”, chuckled Kalev.

Ten there were who doubted, and they soon cautiously identified each other—birds of a feather, flock together. But not wishing to be mocked as cowards—for they felt awkward—they then kept their thoughts within their faction. Should doves of peace fly with hawks of war? Besides, they could privately ponder before they got back to the camp. Funny, really, that the inn where I'hoshua and Kalev had visited, had been infected with faith. Donatiya had said to her daughter, “Mark my words, my dearie. Big changes are afoot. It won’t be long before these people who got out from Khem, will get into Chenán.”

“Aye,” Yassiv had added, coming in, “but by the time they do, we’ll have moved. Just now I’ve heard that my brother has died of his ailments. As I was telling the strangers from afar, being without seed, I inherit his inn way up north in Yerikon. I don’t expect we’ll see that lot where we’re going”, he chuckled paternally, seeing Rachaba’s fallen face.

History can be slow to laugh. Long would it be before the Ivrim returned, and then north, not south, would be their entrance. Yassiv would live to see that day, and little Rachaba—no longer so little, and praying for a little one—would prove to be a heroine extolled while history endures. Long would it be, for Iahveh’s will was not always done. For he often chose to work with his people, rather than in spite

of his people. A shepherd he was, who sought to stay with his sheep. That was happy for the sheep, but hard for the shepherd.

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Panting a little, Moysh stood proudly in front of the twelve leaders, leaning on his long staff. It had been a long month of anxious waiting, before the team had returned in triumph. Cheers had swept through the camp, alerting Moysh to the fact that they were returning. He had dropped everything and rushed to greet them. Though not as young as he had been, the excitement swept him up. Many people pushed and shoved to get close to the returning heroes, even to touch the hem of their garments. Everyone and their dogs, seemed to want a piece of history in the making. The twelve looked like they had all done a grand job, and they brought back a most encouraging token. For they carried a ginormous branch of succulent grapes.

Amiyèl's mind wandered from the gain of grapes, to his recent loss. Ironically, he and Yigal had between them carried the branch on a long pole. It was their attempt at bridge-building. Grapes, wine, it was for want of wine that his father had died a thief. Amiyèl wondered whether some kind of trade could be set up with Chenán.

Perhaps Kalev could use his bloodline to get a discount. That is, if Kalev didn't wind them up into an unwinnable war. Realistically they'd not even get past Ebwon, but nobody had wanted to tell Kalev that on the journey home. They'd just smiled and nodded, as Kalev—and I'hoshua too—hyped up victory. Ebwon, the mighty fortress, would not let them pass, like a bridge descending into the abyss. Once upon a time it had been a backwater village, nothing more, a cattle-town without potential. You could see that the hand of Khem had touched the land since. It was also where the mortal remains of their great ancestors, had been buried as seeds of the future. But the future was now, not in the long-dead past.

"This day is a day of rejoicing!" Moysh boomed, disturbing Amiyèl's musings. "Behold the fruits of the Promised Land. Grapes galore, and other fruit aplenty. Where others have sown, so we shall reap. O sons of Avraam, Izaku, and Iakov, O daughters of Saaran, Ribkan, and Lean, let us this day give thanks to Iahveh, and let now prepare to possess this land of abundance."

Spontaneously, enthusiastic cheering erupted throughout the crowd, which now had turned into thousands. Moysh held up his staff for silence. “Our thanks also go to these leaders in the twelve tribes, who have valiantly taken our offer of peace to the tribes of Chenán. But to what effect, let us now hear.”

For a moment, there was silence. I'hoshua and Kalev beamed broadly. Moysh had pitched it just right. Perhaps their brethren should take up the good news. A little awkwardly, Sammua cleared his throat and addressed the expectant crowd: “Fellow Ivrim, ahem, this is indeed a day for rejoicing, for as our leader has said, behold, we are returned safely from the strong land of Chenán, a land rich in abundance, but, ahem, mighty in battle. But I believe in Lahveh, and that one day we shall be able to take this land for our own. However, unlike these grapes, it is not yet ripe for the picking.

“Nevertheless, there are tensions in the land, and all is not well between Chenán and Khem. I might have died well before, ahem, but I look to a time of strife, when our people shall be able to pick the fruit one by one, and to establish Lahveh as the chief of divinities.” Neither Moysh, I'hoshua, nor Kalev, were smiling now. Things had taken an unexpected turn. There was a deathly silence.

“Verily,” added Yigal, reinforcing the fear sown by Sammua, “leading their swift chariots are giant commanders, a throwback to the nephilim of dark memory. Those shades have taken shape once more, in the tribe of Enack, and are fearful to behold. We all saw such nightmares. Truly the land is a land of the strong, both to the south, and in the highlands, and by the sea. Until things change, we would be fools to enter.

“Nevertheless I too believe that one day we shall have our chance. Let us stay where we are, and see the salvation of Lahveh. For will he not open up the way, as he did the Yamsuf? Wait I say, on Lahveh!”

Bitterness burst out. Frantically people began demanding answers: “Is he right?”, “Will it take years?”, “Why not go back to Khem?”, “Why not be slaves in Chenán?” Kalev raised his staff. He had closer ties to Chenán than most. All eyes fastened on him. “My people, I am taken aback. My friend and brother I'hoshua and I, returned with jubilant hearts uplifted. We spoke openly with our fellows, though it now comes to my mind why they spoke less with us. We had assumed that they were likeminded with us, but they concealed their doubts, I see.”

Kalev slowly looked them up and down in turn. “Are any of you men of faith, or are you of fear?” Some lowered their eyes. Some returned stare for stare. None smiled. “Very well. People of Iakov, hear me well. What is a strong land to us, save an opportunity to see Lahveh’s stronger salvation? Should we wait here to see his glory? No! Do not forget how at the Yamsuf Canal, our leader was himself rebuked for proclaiming the self-same idea. So let him now extend his staff, and let us go forth from victory unto victory. Those who stand against us will drown even upon dry ground. Be strong and courageous. For it is the time to take these nations. Rise up you strong, possess the land.” His stirring speech died in stoney silence, silenced by the hand of fear.

Those who had given stare for stare, now rose up to gainsay him. “Folly, this counsel is sheer folly, and will get us all killed. No, you must understand, Kalev is too taken up with his foreign ties with this land. Maybe he hopes to align with his Kenisiter tribe. They might welcome him and his tribe of Yuda, but what about the rest of us? What deal has he done to hand us over as slaves; to be our king? Kalev the foreigner.

“It is no joke. These people really are like the nephilim of legend, arisen again in power. I speak but the plain truth, We seemed like grasshoppers compared to them. They treated us as the joke! I tell you the truth, you must not overestimate Lahveh. We owe him much, to be sure, but surely not our lives? Didn’t he make us a free people? Let him lead us in, but in our own time, when we judge the land to be riven.”

I’hoshua waded in, strongly siding with Kalev, dismissing the implied aspersions cast upon his friend’s good name, and scoffing the idea that the nephilim had arisen under a new name. But the takeaway fact which the people saw, was that the majority report was five to one. And if only one in five believed in success, could they defeat the peerless peoples of Chenán?

No, best bide their time, until—as was suggested—a time arose when Chenán was divided in strife external and internal—there is weakness in disunity. Then they themselves could march as a united people—there was strength in unity. Then they could house Lahveh in his new home. None of the twelve had taken him in, so it stood to reason that they knew the lay of the land better than he did. He hadn’t been there for hundreds of years, and times had changed.

But then again, if he hadn't known that it was an impossible ask, was it really worth following him? And what of those he had appointed to be their leaders? What had Moysh and Arawon done for them? Many had already paid the price of death. Was Iahveh another Apophis? How many more must perish? And biding their time wasn't such a good option, come to think of it. There were too many mouths to feed; too many needing water, let alone seeking wine.

Realistically, they were weak enough not to attack, and weak enough to be attacked. They had rashly posed a cocksure threat to Chenán; Chenán would soon wise up to their weakness and rightly chide their egregious effrontery. Oh, better to have died in Khem, or even on the way to this place, than to die on the doorstep of a land of plenty, tantalised and mocked. If Moysh wouldn't take them back and make peace with Pharaoh, then best to appoint a new leader.

Bitter complaints rose and fell, and rose again and fell not during the night. Shouts of frustration were sounded forth. Infants cried aloud, unable to sleep and so unhappy. Few attended to their cries. Mothers feared more a dire death in the desert, and men cried out for new leadership, someone to save them from this mess.

In this there was also the silent voice of Zima, seeking to undermine the works of Iahveh. In fear of a Seventh Age, and Umi rethinking the enemy, she now saw wisdom in Yanness and Yambress. She and Umi would be welcomed in Chenán with open arms, if they sent the Ivrim back to Pharaoh's arms—and Iahveh would be defeated.

And yet she stirred only those lowest in esteem among the Sheep. That way, her voice would mingle with theirs, and they would amplify it in their own tones, so that hers should not be discerned by Iahveh. And those lower down the chain, felt themselves flattered as they heard the wisdom of Khem from a magician of Khem, promising the welcome of Khem for the prodigals to return.

Four names of men were cursed, and none of adult years gainsaid the *vox populi*. Was there a silent majority, afraid to speak? Condemned out of hand were first, Moysh, second, Arawon, third, I'hoshua, and fourth, Kalev. Some few women were accursed too, but their names mattered not—for were women not but fools, unfit to be blamed?

These four should be tied to a tree and left to rot, for rotting corpses were what they had in mind for the camp, had they not?

The infestation of fear ran deep and wide, and many of the children thought the same way. Or, if they didn't actually think independently—for independent thought is a skill of later years, and even then not bothered with by some—at least they hosted the thoughts of their parents, and their hearts gave way to bitterness. Many gave themselves over to weeping, and wailing, and cursing their misfortune. Some indeed dissented, but dissent was dangerous talk, and their words were not spoken.

At heart, Lahveh was to blame—so muttered the people. *The Sheep despise their Shepherd*, thought Zima—*must he not now despise them?* For tens of thousands who had once been grateful enough, had by the witness of ten, been reduced to a pack of grumbler. The four villains had met, had prayed, and now confronted the mob. Their names were blacker than the wife of Moysh. They could not guarantee their own skin that foul morn, nor cared overmuch for their own safety. It was the Sheep that mattered to them. Moysh and Arawon, fearing for the people, threw themselves upon the hard unyielding earth, submitting to Lahveh, interceding before him: *In wrath remember mercy.*

I'hoshua and Kalev were too wrath to pray, and castigated the mob. “You blind fools!” bellowed I'hoshua, “do you not see that Lahveh has time, and the wilderness has sand? Will you be content only if your bones infest this land as weeds? And if you are so keen to die, and believe not that Chenán can be taken by you, why not at least march now upon the land, and put Lahveh to the test, and die for your pain? Put not your faith in Khem, from which you have been delivered by Lahveh.”

Kalev took up the haranguing of the herd. “You cannot succeed without the goodwill of Lahveh. You did not have the goodwill of Pharaoh, nor will you have it should you return, but as beaten slaves you and your children shall live and die. Only repent you this day before Lahveh your divinity, and he will open up Chenán unto you—it shall be yours. Do you not see that he is no angry divinity smouldering with rage, spitefully seeking opportunity to smite you from on high? No, he seeks to smile upon us. And the divinities of Chenán, with whom he is displeased, are to him as powerless as those of Khem.”

And Moysh arose and stood forth. And he extolled Lahveh: "Many are the wonders Lahveh has done. The things he has planned for us, what tongue can tell? Were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare. Have you forgotten what he has done, the wonders he has shown you? Has he not worked miracles in your sight in the land of Khem, even among the great cities of the Khemites? Has he not shown his loyalty, love, grace, and compassion?

"Sing to Lahveh, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples. For great is Lahveh, and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all divinities. Do not hide his wonders from your children; tell the next generation of the praiseworthy deeds of Lahveh, his power, and the wonders he has done.

"As for me, I will remember the deeds of Lahveh; yes, I will remember his miracles. I will meditate on all his works, and consider his mighty deeds."

And Arawon too took up the exhortation: "Forget not the days Lahveh manifest his miraculous signs in Khem, his wonders where we were slaves. Proclaim his awesome works; I will proclaim his great deeds. How awesome are his acts! So great is his power, that his enemies cringe before him. Exalt him in his strength; sing and praise his might.

"Him we should worship, who has formed the mountains by his strength. He rules in the fullness of his strength, as he establishes righteousness on earth. He who answers us with awesome deeds of righteousness, is our divinity, our saviour, the hope of all the ends of the earth, and of the furthest seas. Proclaim the glory of his kingdom, and speak of his majestic might. Let all peoples know of his mighty acts, and of the glorious splendour of his kingdom.

"Sing to Lahveh this new song, for he has done marvellous things; his right hand and his holy arm have gained salvation for us. Proclaim his righteousness, his salvation all day long, its full measure unknowable. Bow down and proclaim his mighty acts, declare his marvellous deeds. Even when you are old and grey, he will not forsake you, and will give you time to declare yet further his power to the next generation, his might to all who are to come. Proclaim that righteousness reaches to the skies, of he who has done great things.

"Who is like him, the awesome one, Lahveh Most High, the great king over all the earth, who gives power and strength to his people? Praise him, all you people!"

Perhaps had Miryam sung, the people would have been swayed into song—her song had dried up. The congregation was not impressed: “Lunatics, stone them,” they yelled, “put an end to such speech. Away with these men!” And the enraged crowd cast around for stones to assail the confounded voices of faith. All had risen to screaming pitch. But then a calm unanswerable voice spoke, and the very air quivered with light above the tent of meeting, and power tingled in the air, and the Voice had come in great wrath. And the Voice demanded to know how long it had to put up with such a rebellious riffraff of hooligans, scabby sheep ever straying from their shepherd, turning tail from the green pastures he sought to lead them to. How often must he step in to help, before they would follow him as they had promised, to be blessed and to bless? He would grumble against his grumblers.

Threats seemed to be the only language they could understand. That it wasn’t even spoken directly to them, signalled yet again that Moysh was the favoured one to hear the divine voice—Moysh, whose voice they refused to hear; Moysh, who heard the voice they feared to hear. Stern words crackled like lightning through a storm, snatches of great wrath. Their legs trembled as Moysh knelt.

They had boasted in their ancestry of Avraam, and of Iakov. Now they heard the rumbling Voice that offered Moysh an easy ride: Lahveh could wipe out the entire nest of rebels; Moysh could become the new Avraam, the new Iakov. Yes, he and his immediate family could go in peace into the Sworn Land, and in time the land would be theirs, as easy as picking ripe grapes from a vine. Few words did they overhear, but the sense seemed clear before the Voice departed.

Umi, even his face covered by a sundown shadow, stood towards the back, standing silently. He nodded to himself—a human thing, but a habit which vampires have adopted in blending in with the secondborn of the Children. His ears were better attuned.

Yes, Lahveh was sounding out his appointed leader. On the one hand, any leader too ready to give up on their charges, was not fit for the job, and the people should see that they weren’t fit for the job. But on the other hand, if Moysh begged for their miserable lives, then they should be indebted to him, and know that they owed him their lives.

But, Umi wondered, would any of the secondborn plead for those who even now fingered stones ready to stone them? Would any in a lion's den, not pray that the lions be slain? Yet on bended knee Moysh pleaded for the people, those who had turned from sheep to rabid wolves, turned against him as a pack of mad dogs. But his concern extended beyond his people, to his divinity. Perhaps he felt a real sense of gratitude, maybe even what the Children called, love?

Umi was impressed, and Moysh passed the test—seemingly with flying colours. He'd even recalled that Iahveh's covenant loyalty, his *hesed*, was on test, and that too should pass with flying colours. And so it did, tempering mercy with justice. The Voice spoke again: many below the age of twenty had absolutely no good excuse for their bad behaviour; they had sightlessly seen the works of Iahveh. Still, they would be let off direct punishment.

But for all those over that set age, why, they would wander aimlessly until they dropped, forbidden from entering the land of promise. Exceptions to the rule would be few, for loyalty was the exception to the rule, and loyalty was scarce. The ten agents would feel first the pinch of punishment, but for decades the camp would linger between worlds, wandering, camping, wandering, repeatedly regretting their lack of commitment to he to whom they had sworn an oath of allegiance. The sour grapes they had eaten, were sour too to their betrayed children: the teeth of parents and children were set on edge.

And then followed even greater folly. For now the people switched sides yet again. Now they would ignore the Voice which warned now *against* fighting the Chenánites. Now they decided to go it alone and fight for victory. Were they destined, by some perverse spirit, to ever seek the opposite of what Iahveh commanded? Would the Sheep force the Shepherd's hand, force him to be their puppet king? Umi shook his head—a human thing to do.

They had begged to die in the wilderness, rather than enter Chenán. They had been given their way. They had said that Lahveh hated their children; their children alone would be spared. Farcically, survivors who had been in the census, had attempted to storm the land, to force in Lahveh's kingdom. The bodies of the ten agents who had died, had been buried by their tribes. *Some pestilence of unknown origin*, was the pathology report. It had afflicted their wives, too, and no more was said. The tribal leaders had feared that they too would end up disgraced, their bodies cast below and soon forgotten. That had helped their resolve to fight for their freedom, and they had died in their rebellion, for a prophecy of doom was upon them.

Against the command of Moyshe who had said Stay, they had gone. And in that storming, many had been slain by the sword, and many had been wounded in mortal or moderate ways. Many had slunk back with their tails between their legs. They were fortunate, for the battle had left many with no legs to slink anywhere with. The scars of defeat smarted within many a poor soul and upon many a poor body.

Zima herself felt the keen edge of defeat. Her plan had called for Amiyèl to avenge the blood of his father. But Amiyèl was now beyond her voice. Was that pure coincidence, or had Usen known of her plan? Had he done so, was he minded to protect Umi? Umi was of the Dark. What concern was it of Usen, to protect any of the Dark? Had he a plan to use Umi? If so, to go against Umi was to go up against Usen. But if so, why did Usen not simply hand her over to death?

Zima began to wonder whether Usen was speaking to her, offering her Light. But she hated the Light, and refused to be blinded by its deception. Still, if Usen had read her thoughts, her neck was on the block. It was certainly possible, for he was telepathic, far more so than any in the Kingdom of Darkness. It might be safer to talk Umi out of his weakening, than to kill him, for she had learnt that Lahveh did not force any to go against their own will. If Umi chose to remain in the Dark—as he ought—Lahveh would respect that.

But that thought in itself, triggered further thoughts. Why did Lahveh allow opposition? He could surely force his will on any, if he chose. If

he planned to use Umi, could the master puppeteer not control the puppet, without waiting for the puppet's permission? And why bother with anyone if you could not use them? Necuratu, Lord of Darkness, controlled all he possibly could, by whatever means were at his disposal. His control was only limited to his power. But Usen—why, his power was unlimited.

So why was his control, limited? Why did he value individual freedom, genuine freewill? Why did he respect the freedom to rebel against him? Sure, he might remove the rebellious—though he was obviously reluctant to remove rebellion root and branch. But he seemed even to give those who would spit in his face, opportunity to repent. Why? They could not be of any benefit to him.

Suddenly she stopped in her tracks, for habit had riveted her chains. Such reflections were seditious, to say the least. If she had a right to question Umi's loyalty, Lilith would have a right to question hers. No leeway must be given to the Great Enemy, to Usen the Jailer, to enslave her mind. Beyond doubt the Eighth Law was iniquitous.

But then she asked, where had her idea of iniquity come from? Was it a subjective idea, for which one might as easily think loyalty or disloyalty equally iniquitous? Indeed even if they were, the problem was with the very idea, iniquity, for it implied falling below a moral standard, so implying that moral offence was objectively possible, not merely a matter of taste.

If it was rightful to rage against iniquity—Usen's—from where had her idea of rightfulness come—Usen? If so, how could Usen be iniquitous, if he was the moral rule by which creation judged moral perception? Is the ruler itself out of kilter? But then, what could it be out of kilter with, if it were the brute fact? This was getting increasingly dangerous. Gjaku would have her guts for garters. Even to speak of Umi having an *ought* to remain in Darkness, was relying on the Light to be the moral ground for Darkness being *obligatory*.

She cast out such follies. Surely Usen was messing with her head. She refused to have anything more to do with such incorrect thinking. Usen it was who was the author of confusion. To stop feeding upon his folly, she focused on feeding her stomach. In bat form she flittered unseen from the camp, in search of prey.

For her needs—vampires varied vastly—she could survive hundreds of years without fresh blood. But like all her kind, she usually drank for pleasure, not for need. Of all bloods within the orb of Arda, human blood tasted best, and it always felt to her as a little bit of revenge against Usen, for he referred to such meals, as his children. Nowadays, few vampires bothered with the blood of the firstborn—harder to find and bind. The secondborn were sweet to the palate, easy meals and many. However, unlike Umi, she felt it prudent to leave the Sheep alone, since they were Usen's particular children. So she flew further afield. The Chenánites tasted just as good.

Umi, meanwhile, was busy reflecting on Moysh's attitude. Here was a leader badly treated by those he led. Yet he put his whole heart into protecting them. He was a sheep to Lahveh, but a shepherd to the Sheep of Lahveh, to whom Lahveh was the Shepherd. So, Moysh and Lahveh were shepherds, but of different levels. Could their attitudes be the same, though at different levels? Did that of Moysh, reflect, perhaps even radiate, the attitude of Lahveh?

Moysh had stood to gain nothing for himself, indeed to give up a golden opportunity for self-aggrandisement. Could it be that Lahveh, somehow, had given up an opportunity for self-aggrandisement? Would a flock of sheep from Moses, not have given him greater sacrifice and devotion?

It had always seemed to Umi, that Usen had had no right—save the right of might—to bind the Simbolinian spirits to this woeful world. Could it be that Usen actually had a heart for his creation? But if so, why hadn't he shown his heart to the Simbolinians, innocently straying into the orb of Tellus, yet being bound to this silent planet? And as to those rebellious souls slain in just punishment, if he cared even for them, might it be that some, after death, would be reinstated into his good books, and treated as children under his care? If so, might it follow that even vampires, though most lived as rebels, might belong to a wider flock, and after death be treated as servants under Usen's care?

Such thoughts, Umi realised, were being highly influenced by the proximity of Lahveh—the name Usen used as shepherd of this chosen flock. But he also realised that maybe, just maybe, Usen was

deliberately feeding him such thoughts. At the end of the day, what mattered the most was whether the thoughts were truth, irrespective of source. But if from Usen, did that not matter? Could that not say in itself, that Usen cared enough for him to offer him guidance?

Was Umi not as the rebels in Lahveh's camp, deserving of death? Was Usen offering him a chance to change his heart and mind, to move from the Night into the Dawn? Some vampires had taken that dangerous route. They were hated by the Necros. And, if anything, more so by the Night, to whom they were double traitors. Somewhat less hated, were those vampires who had never dwelt within the Night—a very, very small minority of the Dawn dwellers. Transition was very dangerous, and some had detransitioned.

And yet, and yet, might it be more dangerous not to change sides, if truth itself guided him? To him the danger was not that Usen would throw him to the wolves, or kill him himself. To the Dark the danger of death was merely that it was a step closer to the Unlidded Eye. No, he was thinking more of the danger of remaining blind if truly offered sight. How would it be, after death, to discover that Usen cared for him—not as a dainty morsel to grow fat on, but to fill him with his love? How would it be, if he could have discovered that sooner? It was the danger of living alone, when you could have friends.

He was again impressed by how, sour grapes having been bought by a rebellious generation, Usen would give their children sweet grapes. For Moysh had jumped up from his old knees with words from Lahveh, words speaking of the younger generation succeeding where the older generation had failed. Yes, he had said, Lahveh still intended to take his chosen people into his land of Chenán, though some had been, well, unchosen, deselected. A new target was being prepared; the lambs of today would become the sheep of tomorrow. It was business as usual. Except that it was business unusual. Umi was getting used to listening to paradoxes.

For now, Moysh was reinstated to ascendency, and most people heeded him. He had instructed the camp about sacrifices, unintentional sins as opposed to core sins, and...tassels. Someone, already doomed to die, had further transgressed, and summary execution expedited his doom. Umi found that hardnosed Zima had

likewise become unwillingly interested in such strange ideas, and together they discussed them. Ideas, like a hound, pursued her.

Though they strode silently through the camp, they nevertheless spoke mind to mind. Some who saw them smiled in envy—would these magicians from Khem, perform their magic for them? But the vampires weren't bothered about trivial entertainment. "Umi, I do not see why Lahveh demands of them animals. After all, he is not a creature that needs to draw life into itself. And since he says that he seeks their wellbeing, why should he deprive them of meat?" asked Zima.

Perhaps because of his earlier openness, Umi seemed to better understand the inner rationale to such acts. "It seems to me that it is partly to test their faith in him. They too see the waste, especially of sacrifices in which they get no share of what has been burnt to smithereens. But as with sowing seed for harvest, will he not multiply their livestock for each beast they plant on the altar? Also, he plants in their minds the idea that he is worthy of the best. And does that not teach them humility, that he himself is humble by accepting as his people, they who are few in number and far from best? Again, he himself sets out measures, thus teaching that no less, and no more, is obedience. Remember how they refused to take the land when *it* was ripe, then strove to take it when *they* were not ripe; or stored the mánnak when they ought not store, and stored it not when they ought to store? No more, no less. Is not obedience to train itself to hear his voice? Moreover, some sacrifices are to be based not on what one must do, but on what one wishes to do, a joyful and heartfelt desire to get closer to him."

Umi paused, uncertain. Yet this time it seemed that he would get no blowback from Zima. She seriously seemed to be listening, and thinking it through thoughtfully. He recalled how he had annoyed, even alarmed her, by some previous thoughts, and he had feared that his life might be in jeopardy. The thought, however, that staying close to Lahveh, was staying away from judgement, had given him hope of survival. Upon him the Light was dawning. Now Zima seemed open to explore Lahveh—as Usen called himself.

"I think that I can see that", she admitted. "Indeed, the mention of fine scents would not be to please him who had no nose, but to cover the stench of sacrifices from the sacrificers—though fools believe divinities need soothing by sweet perfumes. And I see too that the words cover

both his Sheep, and those who have attached themselves to the Sheep, even as might fleas. He offers equal treatment to both Sheep and Flea!"

Umi continued: "Eventually, perhaps, Fleas will become Sheep, so to speak. And perhaps, just perhaps, even Leeches such as we, could join with his Chosen. I mean, if we seek, might we not find?"

Zima stood and pondered that. Only a week ago it would have galled her, convinced her conviction that Umi was not fit to live. Suddenly it seemed strangely seductive. If Usen cared for her people, why had he enslaved them, imprisoned them in Arda? But if Usen cared for his people, why had he enslaved them, imprisoned them in Khem?

Could it be that he imposed grief, so that they would welcome him as he who gives hard times, and not simply as he who gives easy times? Is not the hardest climb the most rewarding climb? Did he seek to draw further in and higher up, whosoever could truly enjoy him whether he gave or took? And would he be praised deeper, the deeper down he took, if the troubled really saw his heart? Could she, would she, dare to trust him, she who trusted no one but herself?

Umi saw that shielded thoughts had crossed her mind, and now she was open to listen. "Another thought," he added "is that when they gain the land, and rejoice in its abundance, they should by sacrifice remind themselves of his goodness in allowing them into such land. In this, does he not underline their imperfections, in that they need reminders? And so does he not say that he welcomes the imperfect, the unreliable?"

"And likewise, will he welcome us, if we turn to him?" asked Zima. It seemed to him that she really wanted to know.

"It may be so. I wonder whether he invited us within this camp. Did he mean to invite us beyond this camp? But for the Sheep, even the gifts of the new land, are to be seen as gifts from him, even if given through nature, since even as the land is his, so too is nature", said Umi.

He went on: "Sacrifices underline that at times they will unintentionally go wrong and offend. What he has commanded them matters, if not for its own sake, for the sake of the relationship. This too he would show to them, while showing the desire to restore the relationship. Surely the commands are made for their benefit, even as sheep are commanded by their shepherd for their own wellbeing, howbeit a human shepherd would have need of their sheep."

Zima broke in: "And yet some sheep reject their shepherd. Those, he has said, must be cut off from the flock. Is that too not grace, that he allows defiance against him? Has the Night not been as such?"

"Indeed we have," Umi replied, "yet perhaps we two are now prepared to give him a chance, to consider whether he might be benign, not malign. And it seems to me now that it is likely that he is benign, since he has allowed us to come to such a point."

Zima glanced casually at the many tents they walked past, tents for travelling the wilderness. She heard the cry of a new-born. "As to why some are to be cut off from the Sheep, it comes to my mind that it is to save the Sheep, even as some are best quarantined from the healthy. Yet whether they're cut off by death or distance, might it be that after death, some even of the defiant might prove to have been merely wayward in measure, and welcomed beyond death?" she wondered.

Umi replied that that took matters far beyond what he knew, but he too had wondered. Perhaps he was sharing more of his mind with Zima, than either realised. Were the Chenánites not slated to be cut off from Chenán, whether by distance or by death? Some of the errant Sheep were being cut off from it, condemned to the wilderness until they died. And yet, after death would all such people—whether of the Sheep or of Chenán—be everlastingily rejected by Usen? Had not Kalev and I'hoshua spoken of some Chenánites who had shown willingness to heed Lahveh's claim on the land, as being his own? Would such people be rejected from Usen's Sheep-beyond-Death?

Zima thought about the man who had been stoned to death for rebellion again the seventh-day symbol. It was defiant sin against a symbolic strand woven into the covenant, a covenantal seal between Shepherd and Sheep, a core breach which warranted exemplary punishment. The camp had been a little unsure, a little divided. Perhaps it feared that it would be judged by the standard it judged. But then again, judgement wasn't meant to be its standard.

Some wondered whether such a small infraction really mattered all that much. Some responded that a small crack in a bottle can ruin the good wine within. The question had been put to Lahveh, their suzerain: *Yes it matters a lot*, had been his clear reply, adding that the camp itself must punish he who had sinned against it, stamping out the infection—for the sake of the people, the man must die.

To focus on relational obedience, even clothing could be symbolic. Or so Moysh taught. Tassels with bluish-violet cords would be a distinctive mark, reminding the wearers that they were in a distinctive covenant, perhaps somehow as tassels worn by their divinity. It was such an unnecessary addition to functional garments, as to raise awareness of something beyond mere function, something to fix their minds and hearts on he who commanded the superfluous.

In hope and despair, the Ivrim went into a rift valley and onto mud-flats full of biting insects. Those who despaired, were those sentenced to wander witless till they dropped. That was not a happy thought. Before long, they again made a leadership challenge. For might it not be that with better leaders, Iahveh might treat them better, perhaps even rescind his early verdict in the light of *realpolitik*?

Slowly new grumblings coalesced, with hundreds of tribal leaders representing thousands of rank and filers, gathering around four big names. Moysh and Arawon now stood together as a team, they said, so both must be taken down. The grace shown in allowing the grumblers to live until nature played her part, was not good enough. They had been set aside for life in Chenán, not for death in Kadakeen in the land of Paranu. Iahveh would have to accept their just demands. They had changed, yes really changed. They would follow him better in future. He would lead; they would follow. But there must be new leaders with new ideas. Out with the old; in with the new. The old had too high an opinion of themselves.

Well, it was not the first time that his own people had told Moysh where to go, to get lost. Now they were saying that he had gotten them lost, having taken them where they had not wanted to go. From smarting with shame, they now offloaded their shame onto Moysh. After all, hadn't he run out on them for a generation of years, leaving them to rack and ruin, while he had lived it up in another land? And then to come back and sell himself to Iahveh as the best choice to lead! Moysh had never been the easiest leader to follow.

Korach, of the line of Jizhar, had been the opposition's obvious choice to succeed Moysh. First of all, his tribal lineage—shared with Moysh—had become the only apolitical and priestly tribe. But second—and some would say more importantly—he was the popular choice among the community leaders. The people would follow him,

and he would follow Iahveh, besides advising him on policy. Moysh was the bottleneck he would unblock. And since Moysh had created for himself a high-priest brother to keep power in the family, Arawon would have to be displaced, and a new priesthood established. Korach flagged up that he was ready to wear that crown too, or to pass it to someone more worthy than Arawon. Let the people vote.

However, not all of the conspirators were happy to move quite so soon. After all, said Dathanin, Moysh still had strong backers, such as I'hoshua and K'alev, and many sharp swords to back him. If the trap was sprung too soon, he might yet escape it.

With him, some kept their powder dry. Thus they were absent from the delegation of Korach and his tribe, and even when summoned by Moysh, they refused to meet and replied with insolence. They looked back to Khem as to Paradise. Korach was a bull, but Moysh was a jester who had dragged them blindly from paradise into prison!

But by the hand of Korach their petition was officially laid before Moysh and Arawon. Though couched in diplomatic terms, its message was crystal clear: *Step down, or be strung up. Your kingdom you built; your community you broke. If Iahveh knew, he would break you. We the people say: Holiness by the people, for the people.*

Being no fool, Moysh immediately saw through their virtue signalling. They were hungry for power, mainly for themselves. He feared for his life. For a moment, his enemies half hoped that he had given in, for, casting aside their parchment, he threw himself down to the ground in desperation. But after a quick prayer he arose. "Not all who wander are lost", he said. Studying their faces, in a calm voice he put off his decision until the next day. *Then—he said—Iahveh will join us and will make his own decision, with which you must abide.*

Apparently Iahveh had whispered to him in a quick consultation, for Moysh quickly laid out some procedures for the following day. Each side would see just how far their holiness measured up to priesthood. Did holy callings come from Moysh, or from Iahveh? They were privileged, yes, but were they cut out to lead the holy people?

The next day, they returned, having dressed up as priests. It has been said that whatever you think you are, or at least say you are, that that is what you are, and so all must say in unison. But to self-identify as

a priest, does not a priest make, and though some affirmed them as priests, still they were not. But there they now stood, strutting about in their plumes, as if contestants in a holiness contest—Korach and his merry men of twelve score and ten.

Onin, one of the Four Rebels, had gotten cold feet, and begged off the idea of any grab for priestly power. *Refuse this test*, he said. He was angrily voted down. Unhappy to proceed, he left them to it, moving his tent well away from theirs. But a word once spoken, who can recapture it? Would his insults be forgiven?

Not all friends are true friends, and thus spake Korach: "Friends, we are well rid of Oonin, a scaly scab on fine flesh. Come comrades, this measly mouthed Moysh means to frighten us by a mere meeting. He has gone too far. Now let us take the bait in both hands, and prove that we are able to stand as priests before Lahveh. Will he not welcome new priests, fresh priests with fresh ideas? Will he not heed us, and side with our just complaints over the House of Moysh?"

Soon they stood before the Sacrificial Tent in the chill of the morning. Moysh begged them one last time, to enjoy the holy privilege they had already been given, and not to usurp authority. He had not stolen from them or from anyone to gain his position. However, his words fell upon deaf ears; on stoney ground they died. Well, since they still wore insolence as a crown, his clouds of warning turned to the rain of insults. He drenched their heads in wrath, and flooded the very ground upon which they still believed they stood firm.

Finally, in exasperation he stood back—let Lahveh sort them out. They took their places and the test began. Against them stood simply Arawon, who for all his priestly regalia, looked all alone and forlorn, one against hundreds. All ritually offered incense to Lahveh. The watching crowd wondered which side would win out; hopes were divided. There stood the holy tent of the holy presence, where suzerain met with subjects. And as they watched, the air tingled with his power, his clouds rumbled, and alongside the words of Moysh, his rain of wrath lashed down.

And then a glow hovered above the tent. The Voice threatened to punish there and then these wannabe priests, and also the hoggish crowd, where hopeful bets were on a leadership coup. Again, Moysh

had to publicly affirm that his heart was with his people, but he agreed to a needful cull. Again, Iahveh had tested and approved him. Therefore, punishment was limited to the offenders and to their immediate families, for all must see that the sin of rebellion did not only endanger themselves, but had collateral damage. Howbeit some family members had separated themselves from their tents, refusing to stand in solidarity with Korach, and so along with Oonin they were spared. I'hoshua stayed to guard the prisoners awaiting punishment. Taking Kalev and some soldiers with him, Moysh went quickly to the rebel tents, to root out that hornet's nest.

Korach and his confederates stood dejected, sick at heart, encircled now in a ring of bronze swords under the command of I'hoshua. They had all heard the Voice; their coup had been rejected; Iahveh wasn't interested. Moysh had gone quickly to the southern section of the camp, where the rebels had pitched their tents.

Word went before him in great wrath. Dathanin heard first. His rebels must quickly prepare their defence. He rushed to his brother: "Abiramin, runners warn that attack by Moysh is imminent. As an ill bird fouling its own nest, fool Korach has blundered. Didn't I say that it was too soon to reveal our hand? Hurry, get everybody out of their tents. And armed. Kalev comes with soldiers." He then alerted his own compound. The rebel alliance hastily threw up barricades.

Thus it was that Moysh found them well prepared. He held up his hand, and his men stopped dead. Above them, the sky still raged. He wondered if he would catch his death. He raised his voice. "Doom is upon you," he shouted above the storm, "O brood of vipers. Yet if any here reject the venom, depart swiftly in peace. Yet O rebels, fear not my sword, for by the word of Iahveh I declare to you this day, that Iahveh himself shall stand forth, and justice shall be his. For see, my hand shall not be seen." Slowly he lowered his hand.

It was important that this was not simply seen as a power struggle on the human level. Moysh himself did not know what would happen, but he felt in his bones that something extraordinary was about to happen. All he knew, and had foretold, was that the rebel camp would sink down as if to sheol itself, to the very place of the dead.

As some bystanders, fearful of unknown judgement, walked swiftly away from their rebellious kinfolk, the rebels jeered them in defiance. And yet they were not fools to come out to face the swords of Kalev. No, they remained surrounding their own little enclave of tents—their cancer cell within the camp. They stood tightly huddled together, wondering whether Kalev would lead troops against them with sword or with arrow, once observers had fled. Surely Moysh had set an ambush, and they had fallen into his trap. Korach be damned! They circled, as it were, their tents, to fight to the bitter end.

In fear they stood; by fear they fell. The local desert dwellers could have warned them of the dangers of the seemingly solid *kewirs*—the mudflats—upon which they stood. But they had not spoken with the locals. Fire flashed above, and thunderous rain still fell heavily from on high, and the ground groaned by reason of the unsustainably restless load bearing down upon it.

Then the unexpected happened. The drenched surface could no longer stand the pounding and shuffling weight impacting it. It cracked. And as the crust collapsed, those who had scurried shivering upon it, now sunk—along with their tents—into the deep mass of liquid mud and ooze, upon which it normally rested as a dry thin skin. Now, annoyed like a ravenous beast, it opened its jaws wide, swallowing up the rebel alliance. No trace was left but foul bubbles. A final bolt of lightning lit up the sky, and the rain's fury fizzled out. But beyond their first death, those removed by death from this life, would then stand before their judge in the life beyond death, to receive their fair measure of praise and of censure. For is it not that individual judgment is fully given, that full allowance is made for excuses, and that full grace is given to whosoever will welcome it?

For a while, Moysh remained on the hard yet cracked clayey crust. He knew that he was in safe hands, though none now stood with him. In silence he mourned the loss of so many, who had not been totally evil, but had by evil threatened the survival and security of the camp. At last he turned away, looking up to the sky where brightness now rose where once was storm. He returned with Kalev to Korach, but on arriving back at the outer tent, there were only ashes and scorched ground to be seen. A dry wind blew away the last drops of rain.

“My lord,” said I’hoshua, “as we stood on guard, a bolt from above near blinded us, yet none of the guard were harmed. However, Korach and his men were burnt to death upon the carpet on which they stood. Never have I witnessed anything like it. Now only the smouldering remains remains, though the priestly censers are undamaged.”

Moysh stroked his beard: “The unholy who would be priests, depart, and the holy artefacts, remain. Do not use them for their purpose, but instead hammer them into bronze panels, to hereafter shield the holy, and remind all that the unholy should not venture into the holy.”

And yet rebellion still lurked within many a heart, unhappy to live and die between Khem and Chenán. That night, rumours began to circulate, that while Moysh had diverted attention from Korach, and bunched up his remaining opposition on precarious ground—*I reckon a trick he learned when living in hiding*, said one—he’d left word for a secret slaughter of Korach and his men, burning up the bodies to cover the crime—*blame it on the storm? Humbug!* Yanness and Yambress stole silently away from the camp.

The very next day, tribal elders charged Moysh with unholy murder, and unlawfully disposing of the bodies. Again, he and his brother stood before the holy tent. Again, the Voice descended. It offered to exterminate the troublemakers. Both Moysh and Arawon bowed to the ground in submission, begging for the people. Just how much more could they be bitten by the Sheep, and still care for the Sheep?

Then word reached the delegation of elders, that a plague of biting insects was swarming through their tribes, biting as they swarmed. A few people had died within minutes from severe reaction; hundreds upon hundreds were being taken unwell to their tents—was this a judgement on them? Arawon burned worship incense unto Lahveh. And the wind of Lahveh responded, bringing neither storm nor sting, but blowing the plague from sight. But not before many lay labouring for their last breath. At last the voice of rebellion was hushed over the camp, replaced by the voice of wailing and of vain prayers.

“My lord Moysh,” said I’hoshua, “after the storm there is calm. But what raised the storm? With your permission, I will investigate the cause, for are there snakes still in the camp, troublemakers that seek your life?” Moysh heard these words of hope, but had little hope.

The leadership had been confirmed yet again. But questioning Arawon's fitness, actually had some justification. As things stood, he really was getting rather old and frail—decidedly doddering, some said. Some who weren't power players, really did wonder whether his sons were best placed to take over from him. A generation misshapen by great tribulation, were slow to bow again to anyone, even to their patron divinity, who had allowed, even encouraged, such suffering.

Two of Arawon's sons had been slain by Lahveh, as unfaithful and unfit for purpose. Word had it that they had attempted to introduce a few foreign ideas into what Lahveh had set out, just a touch of syncretism to make matters more inclusive and diverse, to better fit in to Chenán. Why hassle when you could harmonise? Arawon himself had, admittedly, made his own mistakes and come a cropper. With such a track record, why not change the priesthood? A more respectful contingent had politely put that question to Moysh. Moysh, Yes please; Arawon, No thank you. Incited by Yanness and Yambress, Zimris, son of Saluvo of the Sumeyon tribe, had had a private and rather painful interview with Moysh.

Moysh had been at pains to highlight that it had not been nepotism, in fact not even his choice. Lahveh had selected; Lahveh's will be done on earth. But to kill off further dissention without killing off the dissenters, an extra confirmation would be given that Arawon was Lahveh's choice while the covenant endured, a dynasty of priesthood.

And so it came to pass. For one candidate, from each of the twelve secular tribes, wrote their name on long dead branches of their choosing, branches that had been cut down to serve as common walking sticks. Arawon did the same. Many could have written their name; few dared the test. Certainly from his tribe, none but Arawon now dared to enter the priesthood contest.

Each candidate examined each stick. All sticks were put into the inner shrine overnight, as if placed in the very lap of their divinity. All personnel left the compound, and representative guards secured the outer tent. By the morrow, besides having sprouted green signs of life within, Arawon's stick had even produced brownish seeds. Beyond

expectation, that staff of life was taken by all as sign enough. Iahveh had spoken: had he not once brought the ancient womb of Saaran, wife of Avraam, back to new growth and seed?

Covenants, in themselves, never die, and so are spoken of as eternal. For everyone understood that unless they as vassals substantially violated their covenant, it could never be justifiably annulled by its suzerain. They understood too, that Iahveh would never unjustifiably annul a covenant in which his chosen priesthood had been so clearly confirmed. No, the dynastic line of the brothers Eleaz-arnak and Itham-arnak, sons of Arawon, would surely endure while the covenant endured. Should any new line assume new priesthood, it would either replace or violate the existing covenant.

Moysh comforted his people. The Voice had not thundered; their fear was in vain. But taking the genuine concerns, Arawon began to look seriously to his succession, training up his sons for the priesthood. Iahveh himself instructed him one to one.

The rest of their tribe were of an in-between status, more holy than the rest of the tribes—who were relatively foreigners—but less holy than priests. They would help the priestly in many semisacral ways, indeed would be a semisacral buffer zone, since the holier the layer, the greater the danger.

Candleholders, one might say, and well worth a small tribute from the other tribes to keep them separate unto their holy calling, for they held the light of covenant holiness, to enlighten their people. Better organisation would help allay the fears of the camp, and better prepare the priesthood to enter the new land.

The best and the first, was the rule of thumb. Even firstborn sons were symbolically Iahveh's, and nominally bought back, redeemed from holiness, desacralised into normal society—as nonkosher animals were likewise to be. Cannibalism was not on the menu, but firstborn kosher animals were to be used for symbols of dedication, and also for good old fashioned roast meat.

And those merely of the special tribe, must contribute a quality tithe of their income, upline to the priests—even the best of the best wine. Thus the priests' tithe would come from the higher holiness levels of the people, not directly from the common stock. So Moysh had said.

And much more was said at that time to Moysh and to Arawon. Then came the years of peace, in which grumbling ceased or lay hidden. By wandering to milk the seasons, the people discovered that they could weather the wait, and get by pretty well. But after many many years, expectations arose about Chenán. After all, most of those slated to leave their bones in or around their main site of Ka-adekseen, had departed this lifetime. The leading family was finding life more difficult, for the years will weary and condemn.

Even Umi and Zima appeared to age. But vampires do not exactly age. After all, their physical bodies, while mortal, are but assumed by them, a shell woven around them. Comparatively, we are bodies which put on clothing to warm and cover the body, but vampires are spirits who put on bodies as clothing not to warm, but to cover the spirit. Such bodies had, however, become integral to them, and were partially maintained by thelodynamic power, and, fed by blood they transformed into tissue, in large measure their bodies maintained themselves. Vampires were shapeshifters, and could at will age their appearance, to fit in with their disguise among the secondborn.

At this time, Umi and Zima approached Moysh. "My lord," began Umi, "as you well know, many years ago, you welcomed us two into this camp, though in times past we stood opposing you before Pharaoh's throne. Now behold, your sister-saviour Miryam lies mortally ill at death's door. By the magic of Khem, we are well able to cure her, giving her life that will take her well into the land of Chenán, of which my lord has spoken."

"It is as gift, that we seek to bestow life unto her", Zima added. "We have seen great kindness from this camp; we would show kindness to the camp. Moreover, we have learnt much of, and from, your divinity, and have seen your great heart. Would you not seek your sister's recovery?"

For a moment, a lifeline was offered unto Moysh. But was the lifeline holy, and if so, was it holy to welcome it? Can it not be holy to release life, when it is time to return the gift of body to the dust?

Seeing hesitation, Umi went on to explain: "We would perform a short ceremony—without invoking any of the divinities. It is simply a magic in which we but draw forth a little blood from a small part of the neck, and add a tiny amount of dust. Behold, before the twilight fades into night, you will see the colour coming back into her face, and she will tell you that the pain is gone. After hours of sweet and wholesome sleep, she

will rise from her bed like one new born. But we will not perform this white magic without your consent, lest Lahveh be endangered."

To be fair, the offer was indeed partly to repay something of their debt which now they felt. But old habits die hard. They saw it too as a means to achieve strategic control among the Sheep, since Miryam would by mind-control, become a slave in their hands, manipulated by telepathy, as is the vampire way.

That would afford them added protection against the Night. For though the Night has no love for those who move into the Dawn, yet any ally within the Dawn who could influence Lahveh through a key player, would be feted. But the feting of the Night was not worth the risk of offending the Light, and so they would only attempt enslavement with due permission.

But their offer fell on deaf ears. Moysh didn't need long to think about it. "Friends, though you are foreigners, you have been welcome among us. Indeed, our people are blessed so that one day all peoples will be blessed. But you do not yet understand our ways. Whenever we see a human corpse, we are to remind ourselves that only the body is in death.

"For the righteous, death is a doorway unto everlasting life, and so we who wail rejoice for such departed. For her sin of rebellion, for my sister—though accounted righteous—it is ordained that she shall not see the land promised to our people. Therefore she now reflects on her sin, and on Lahveh's grace, and will shortly die in peace."

Umi looked unsure. "But my lord, if that be the case, shall your brother Arawon not also die this side of Chenán, since he too played a part in her rebellion? Would you save neither brother nor sister?"

"Verily his death cannot be long delayed," Moysh replied, looking longingly to the skies, "and nor shall I stand in the way of his death. For to intervene would neither be grace to him, nor to the camp."

"Well," said Zima, after they had walked away, "it seems that Miryam must simply die, and that we must take our chance. Yet it strikes me surpassing strange, that among the Sheep, the buffer between Eä and Usen is considered to be closer to joy, whereas among us it is considered to be closer to fear."

Umi smiled: "Perhaps you should say, *As it has seemed to us*. For have we not come to consider that death might in fact lead to a welcome

destination, a stopping of the chariot at the palace?" Reflectively they walked on. So much prejudice had blinded their eyes to the nature of Usen, even as the Night had blinded their physical eyes from the bright sun of day. Their hatred of sunshine had diminished with their intolerance. Usen's shepherding of his sheep, and forbearance of them, had shown them a more positive side to his nature.

Zima was having similar unspoken thoughts. Her heart felt lighter, and her thoughts felt brighter, though she knew not why. She knew that every rebellion involved risk, and vampires of the Dark were adverse to risk. She did not realise yet that rebellion was in hope, and that hope was changing her. Was the fear of death, which had held her in bondage, dying? Was not love releasing her?

Certainly the secondborn did not smile at death, but they smiled beyond death. As Moysh had predicted, the sickness of Miryam was unto death, and the brothers wept bitterly for their loss.

Songs she had composed were sung reverently at her funeral. Hundreds upon hundreds of women paraded, disporting their drums, fingering their flutes, striking their cymbals, and lilting their lyres, snaking around and around the burial mound, dancing and weaving in and out of the gathered mourners.

Singers led the merry dance. "Sing praises to Iahveh," they sang, "for glorious his battle! His mighty arm threw down, the riders and the ridden. Sing praises to Iahveh, exalt him all ye people." *Miryam, O fallen prophetess. You fixed our focus on Iahveh. You declared our deliverance in dynamic song. O sweet lady, rest now in peace.*

But they had moved to a campsite in Hoo-rebin, the area of Synaj, to a site where the expected oasis was discovered to be bone dry. It was such a disappointment to thirsty travellers. Miryam, had she been there, might have cheered them up. But now she was gone. Those waiting to die, turned once more to grumbling. Was the whole assembly doomed to die? Moysh was targeted again, threatened with death. Again, he pleaded with Iahveh, he and Arawon fearful of divine wrath being outpoured on the miscreants.

This time however, Iahveh seemed more sad than angry, and spoke in gentle words to Moysh and to his brother. Moysh simply needed to take his stick, that reminder of miracles, and speak in faith to a

great rockface. And there Moysh gathered the people. All seemed to be peaceful, but then Moysh finally snapped, broke out like new wine from an old wineskin. Perhaps he was still mourning for the loss of a sister. A leader should be resilient, but leadership takes its toll. Whatever it was, the build-up of so much frustration, finally got to him—for none in mortal lands are unflappable.

Rebels! he spluttered. *Rebels!* he fumed. Finally they got the edge of the tongue of he who had often stood between them and Lahveh. In condemnation and sarcasm he burst out, twice slamming his staff against the unoffending rock. Did he feel that force, not mere words of authority, were needed in this case, whatever Lahveh had said?

Then he realised that he had secretly wished for Lahveh to have thundered above a terrified camp, and that he, Moysh, would yet again be seen as saving them by the skin of their miserable teeth. But Lahveh hadn't played ball. That had rather undermined Moysh's authority. He had been let down by his boss, and felt rather sore. He'd done a hard job so well for so long, and deserved better.

Though chastened, the people nevertheless appreciated the gushing water which sprang from the porous water-laden rock, whose weakest point had been ruptured. The livestock were grateful as well. However Arawon was unhappy. "Brother, we both knew what you were to do. Why then, did you disobey? I already have the name of Rebel, as did she who was our sister. Do you seek the same brand?"

"Of course, I'm ever so sorry now", Moysh quietly replied. "It started well, but somehow I just lost it—honestly I couldn't help it, like being sick. I hoped to break my staff. You at least know the pressure I've been under for goodness knows how long, pressures I've bottled up. It got to me at last, especially as Lahveh didn't back me up by raising his scourge of flaming judgement—and all on top of losing Miryam. And you yourself could've said more in my defence, you being the undisputed high priest now."

Arawon was visibly moved: "Yes, your pain and impatience was clear to everyone, but that's just the problem. I'd love to see you honoured more than you are, but don't you see that it cut deeper? Won't Lahveh see that your pain and exasperation were against him, as if he's let you down, and given you too much to bear? Did your words reflect faith in him to act, or did they leave open any old thing to happen? Didn't your actions

dishonour a holy event which he had planned, a rock made holy by his presence, something that symbolised him with us?"

His brother looked uneasy, and Arawon's words were soon confirmed. When next they met, Lahveh spoke sternly. For his sin, Moysh was severely reprimanded, and with Arawon would be banned from the new land. His leadership would terminate on the doorstep of Chenán.

Truth be told, Moysh breathed an inner sigh of relief, for he really was getting very old now, and in truth doubted both his ability and his willingness to begin afresh in a new land. To be relieved of command would be a blessing, not a curse. Perhaps Lahveh knew that, and was dressing down blessing as a curse. And in peace Moysh bowed his head in reverence—*hasten, lord, the day!*

In his bones, Moysh felt that the time had come, or almost come, for the flock to enter the land of Chenán. Perhaps he would die in battle. Before him now stood his two main generals, I'hoshua and Kaleb.

To his mind, the Ebwon Offensive must be avoided, for to awaken that plan would be to stir up old fears. He spoke of going north, paralleling Chenán to its east, and then turning southwest to invade. Kaleb chipped in: "My lord, when we explored the land, I met with kinfolk who looked to move to the gateway town of Yerikon upon a death. If that family be there, we might find a strong ally within its walls, but from how Yassiv—that's the man we met—described it, it has long fallen from its glory days, though will still be a large hurdle to overcome. But Lahveh is with us, so let us fear not." I'hoshua spoke in full accord.

Moysh was encouraged. From where they were, they could leave well-stocked with supplies, and travel first through friendly lands wherein lived the Edomaca, a kindred people from of old. However, he had learnt that when you think things should be easy, the twist of fate might turn the easy to hard.

Rather than begin the journey blind, he first sent a message to prepare the way, a friendly petition to their king. It underlined the brotherly relationship that connected them, the hard times that the Ivrim had experienced, that the Mighty One of Iakov travelled with them, and that they now sought to pass peacefully through their friends' land—they wouldn't even ask for supplies *en route*.

The Edomaca, however, were a suspicious people. Their policy was not to let illegal immigrants swarm across their borders unopposed, for once in, might they not seize control? Besides, though of shared ancestry, the brother of Edoma had been a grasping swindler, causing Edoma much grief. No, that branch of the family simply wasn't to be trusted: give them an inch and they could become a ruler.

Accordingly, the Ivrim were warned off—*trespassers will be shot on sight; you shall not pass*. Moysh's attempts of pacific correspondence, were all in vain. The grasping brother had bitten; Edoma was twice shy. While brother Iakov was now bigger in his descendants, he was still not stronger, for the Edomaca had the better weapons and fighters, and knew their own land. Finally, Moysh decided to skirt around the Edomaca. It would take a little longer, but be a lot safer.

Sadly, Arawon departed from them on the north-western border of that friendless land. With two companions he climbed to the top of a high mountain. That was his last vantage point of the future. He did not return to the mortal world. His body was buried there; his soul was deeply mourned. Resented even by a brother-people, he had died shamed from their land. Yet to his ancestral home he was gathered without shame, and his joy vastly exceeded the lot of mortals.

Returning to its foot, Moysh paused and looked back up the hill. The old generation was now nearly gone; would he too depart within sight of the land, so near and yet so far? He and his people had long firmly believed in life beyond the grave. How far back did that go, he wondered? Like those of Khem, the Ivrim also normally buried extra things inside graves or tombs, symbolising a transference of life-implements, such as bowls, jars, and lamps.

He knew that some actually believed that lamps were needed to lighten the dead. He smiled. He didn't know of any people who did not share such views, and Iahveh had definitely not denied it. Yet somehow, Iahveh did not seem to exploit it, as if bait to catch the people. He believed that Iahveh himself would be a lamp within the shadow lands. He looked up and sighed. Arawon now rested. Must his ancient bones wait much longer? It would have been nice had the people not spoken against an Ebwon Offensive, all those years ago—to cross into the land, would have been nice. He turned wearily away.

SEVENTEEN ~ LAND IN SIGHT

The mortal span of Moysh had not come to an end, but it had come to the beginning of the end. It was not long before one of the Chenán states—about a day's long trek but closer north than Ebwon—arose against the Ivrim, reasoning speciously that the timidity in avoiding direct fighting, implied weakness. What is the use of superior numbers, if their numbers can't fight and lack the weapons of war? Thus the Aradului people started a fight, taking many prisoners. But it was the Ivrim, who took the final victory.

For this time, right was on their side, as was Lahveh. And his blessing counted for much. Besides, the Aradului were part of the Chenán confederacy, and so fair game for destruction. The Ivrim knew that though they were avoiding going against Ebwon, a decisive defeat of the Aradului would play a good part in psychological warfare.

It would be priceless if the enemy to come, upon hearing the approaching Sheep, would be filled with panic, would tremble at the rustle of that leaf, as though it were a sword, even though it was but a leaf and not a sword. How wonderful it would be if the main enemy became faint at heart, seeing itself as a grasshopper before giants? How priceless it would be if a panic attack made a military attack needless, and the people of Chenán simply ran away without being chased, stampeding to safer lands, lest they be devoured as grass by Lahveh's sheep? Scare tactics can be mightier than the sword.

With victory over the Aradului, Moysh himself was so overjoyed, seeing at last some early fruit of what was to be, the end of the beginning, when his people fought in obedience, not in disobedience. Yet still he feared to attack Ebwon, and led the camp east, then north, skirting the lands of Chenán and of the Edomaca. This was through barren land, and was a difficult path to tread. Again the people suffered, and again they stirred up resentment against him.

They also stirred up the fiery snakes of that region, burning like seraphim, and lighting many a deadly flame within their frames. At first, many cited the snakes as yet another reason to blame Moysh, but soon many of the younger generation came to believe that the

snakes were biting because they the people, had blamed Moysh—*We have sinned against heaven and against you*, they cried.

Then word went out of a mysterious cure. In spite of his warnings against making any kind of idol—lest it be worshipped as a divinity—Moysh created a metal idol in the shape of a snake, as if somehow a vaccination against venom. Some wiseacre quipped that maybe someday Lahveh would order his people to kill and eat unkosher food!

But should wrong use abolish the right use? For Lahveh's people, idols are bad, but this idol was good for them. Those who blamed Moysh, did not bother with his quack remedy. But those who blamed themselves, came humbly before Moysh, and looked upon his bronze snake. They thought it foolish, but that was precisely why it acted so well as a point of faith, going beyond mere human thinking into logic itself, entering into the realm of spirit. The visible idol could not cure them, but the invisible Lahveh could, and did. That was the logic.

Still, when they travelled beyond that land of vipers, their spirits arose. On arriving at Oboth, they had optimism, and by the time they tasted the beauty of Beer, they were of good cheer. So when the people perceived a lack of water, they trusted their leader. Then they happily broke forth in song and dance, singing in prophetic voice to a waterless well, ancient and partly collapsed, calling upon it to spring up once more with copious water. And it did! Who knows, perhaps the pounding feet of so many folk as they sang their folksongs, cracked open that old well. But who cares? For it awoke, and sang back to them in bubbling mirth.

Refreshed, and with water jars abrimming, they travelled on towards their goal. And walking with them between the two camps, were Umi and Zima, who had witnessed a radical transformation of a grumbling people, and seen how such negativity can wear down even the greatest of mortals. The damage was undeniable, but a new hope had dawned for the people, and a new dawn had arisen for them.

While the Sheep simply called him, Guardian Lahveh, both vampires knew him to be Usen the One, the uncreated power behind all powers. Moysh was one of the few Sheep who saw beyond the veil, that Lahveh was more than a divinity, even though he divinised himself as disguise. But even Moysh had never fully shaken of that

lesser idea, and mixed his language. Yes, Eä the universe showed Usen's handiwork, but on Arda he showed himself most among his chosen people, and had allowed Umi and Zima to listen and learn, to think about the light outside of their own dark bubble.

Optimistically cautious, described them well. So it was not to him, but to his servant Moysh, that they turned to understand more. Doubts about Usen still remained, and his attitude to them was still somewhat unclear, but seemed not to be hateful. Moysh was their man, but he sat busy inside his tent, alongside various of the tribal leaders, and the two vampires stood patiently outside as outsiders.

Meanwhile, those inside were discussing plans to move through the lands ahead. Taken from their stay in Khem, they had some military documents, both ancient and modern, written in the style of wisdom ditties, easy to memorise but sometimes out of date. These they were consulting. They were thinking that the Emoreusok people, the next people-group to face, would probably have to be fought.

"For the Book of War," Kálev was saying, "says that they took over a chunk of land from the people of Mooab, who now dwell as southern neighbours under their sway. Such a people are unlikely to let us pass through without debate. And if Mooab comes to their aid, it will be a strong shield before us. But by my counsel, we shall press forward nonetheless, for is our divinity not with us?"

I'hoshua suggested that Mooab might well defy any call to arms, and content itself with its own borders, "For," he added, "though they have fear of the Emoreusok, they have no love for them, or so it is said. And they may hope that we will become peaceful neighbours—if we have the advantage—or that if we are defeated, the Emoreusok will have been weakened enough to be defeated and enthralled."

Moysh paid attention, while each leader added to the discussion. When all had been said, it seemed clear to him that whether or not Mooab would aid the Emoreusok, the latter must first be asked for a peaceful passage through their land. If that was permitted, it would also allow them to pass by their subjugate neighbour unhindered. He wished now to get his people as quickly as may be into the heartlands of Chenán—outlying lands were at most secondary targets. If they could peacefully skirt Mooab, he hoped to avoid any conflict with them and head northwest to Yerikon. Little did he know that the

Necros was fighting against his people. Having sung a victory song in praise of Lahveh, all but Moysh departed the tent.

His rest was interrupted. "Please my lord, if you are not too weary. We from Khem come seeking wisdom. Teach us", asked Umi, bowing low at the entrance to the tent. Moysh smiled, taking a little breath, but politely concealing his tiredness. These two had, so far as he could see, been exemplary guests within the camp over the years, a different spirit from their colleagues, though as guests both were excluded from Lahveh's covenant blessings and curses. So far as he could see, they would see the camp into the new land, and could well become a blessing to his people. *Hey-ho, what is it they wish to know?*

They guessed his feelings well enough, but guessed that he lived life in the weary zone—there was no best time to disturb him. "My lord Moysh," began Zima, "we've been thinking a lot about all the regulations you've given on what is unclean, what is clean, and what is holy. You've said that dwellings of mildew require special sacrifices, as do women each month. You've taught that your common holy-as-people, can for a time become holy-as-priests, yet afterwards require the same special sacrifices. Please help us to understand. Why do some normal states require special sacrifices, and some supranormal things likewise require them? Is there rhyme and reason?"

Moysh smiled, and this was a happy smile. In his heart he knew that his own people would usually be more concerned about compliance, than about understanding; the hands, rather than the heart. Here were two outsiders, really seeking the truth within the rituals—was there such faith within the Ivrim? He had been sent to the lost Sheep, but here were Dogs, themselves unclean, but humble enough to eat even the crumbs of wisdom. Somehow he felt less weary.

At the back of his mind, fears slumbered about the other magicians from Khem. I'hoshua had interrogated survivors of what had become dubbed, *The Korach Killings*. He and his wife had discovered that the accusation of political assassination, had been suggested to his people by none other than Yanness and Yambress—black magicians. But that it had burnt through the camp, showed that the camp was, alas, only too willing to believe such tales, and shared culpability. Unlike Umi and Zima, those other two had professed allegiance to Lahveh, but I'hoshua had discovered that that had been but a hollow

profession of faith, presumably designed to garnish influence among the elders of the Ivrim.

Since that incident, those two had disappeared back into the camp of the foreigners, the unclean ragtag. Moysh had thought it best to let it drop. After all, the foreigners were not his people, nor was he their shepherd. He had no wish to spark any fights between his people and them, by dragging Yanness and Yambress away by the scruffs of their necks. He hoped that once they came into the Promised Land, all the foreigners would take Lahveh as their sole divinity, and so be saved into that level of salvation.

But whether or not they did, didn't matter to their destination beyond earth. If it did, Moysh would have been obliged to offer such an ultimate message to everyone in the world. But here on earth, over multiple generations, foreigners could increase their citizenship until their descendants were full citizens. But for now he was content with their foreign beliefs. Even the great father of his people, had had a father who worshipped the heavenly lights, instead of their creator.

Offering the two magicians some wine and bread, he bade them sit. Yes, they were of a different spirit, genuinely seeking to learn, and he began to teach them. "As you know, there are commands which are for all people of all time, moral imperatives. And as you now know, there is much symbolism based on the created order reflecting the spiritual order. Take bodily discharges. Some reflect the elements of human life, of blood which keeps life, or of the gift which transfers life. Thus in the flow of life, there can be symbolic defilement even when there is no moral defilement, for our bodies can reflect the loss or transfer of life. The times are blessed, and invite remembrance and celebration of offerings unto our divinity. It can cost to remember, but the remembrance is blest.

"Now, although we often speak of such states as unclean, perhaps we should speak more of the idea as subnormal, a downward shift from the normal. And you people of Khem we deem to be spiritually subnormal, compared to our normal. And within our normal, there are those who are supranormal, or as we simply say, holy. But then, if we are all holy compared to you people—who are yourselves holy compared to mere animals—then say that some of us are more holy than others, a higher

level of holiness. For this very word can mean a quality of life, but can also mean a closeness to Lahveh.

"And herein is the clue to some of our sacrifices. For men and women of common level among us—and most of us are of that relationship—who seek a deeper connection with Lahveh, are permitted for a season to leave their level of mere cleanness, and to rise above our normality.

"But understand that there is no sin in being where he would have us to be, although we can sin whatever our relational level with him. And with women who have unusually bled, or have unusually spent deeper time with Lahveh, it is the same offering—but for usual bleeding, the usual abnorm of life going out, simple symbolic washing is all that is to be made. And so the same offering is to be made, whether to restore up to the norm, or to restore down to it. It is relational levels that are therefore signified to the offerer, and reminders of the rises and falls of the spiritual dimension. So too with mildew, and many other issues, such as skin blemishes, which remind us of movement from what is normal life and living.

"Symbolic washing is an important way to highlight the problem of falling below what Lahveh intends, and perhaps pictures a time when we will be transformed above the norm—but I see but in part.

"Consider thus the new rite of red heifers. Here we must choose only the flawless and unused of them, and eat no part—yet is this waste? With the eye of flesh, do you not ask, Is this not a magnificent waste of these magnificent blood-red animals of high value—for heifers are more valued than bulls, since in the way of animals only one bull is needed to serve many heifers; and are the best not best to improve the herd? But the eye of the spirit replies, Nay, such slaughter values fellowship over farmstock. No, such is not waste, but teaching and test. Nor is it a common sacrifice of mere bulls. And by its blood we see our blood. And by its dedicated ashes—too holy to touch and making unholy the toucher—when mixed with water for washing, we are holified.

"Does it not move us when we hear her mooing as she is taken outside of the camp? And as she dies, do we not hear her muffled bleating as she bleeds from her death wound? Do we not feel her warm blood? Do we not smell the acrid odour of the fire, with the added cedar and hyssop adding their evocative smells? Do we not see that she has died for us?"

They were quiet, for there was much to consider. Then Umi spoke up: "But master, is it moral that those who suffer blemishes of the skin,

should further suffer as blemishes removed from the wider community, indeed treated as cast-off skin? For as all know, these blemishes are neither sinful, nor do they spread."

Weighing up the question, Moysh nodded his old head slowly in agreement. Truly these magicians were not daft. "My friend, the separation is neither because of their sins, nor to spare others. But do you not see that even as some wilfully rise far above the norm into the higher, so some unwilfully fall far below the norm? This too is a lesson which can bless them. They will not be alone, for many will live in the camp-below-the-camp. Even below the norm, they can know Lahveh.

"It is true to say that they may blame Lahveh, as if he has jailed them for no fault of their own. And he permits them thus to sin against themselves, for all sin is relational at heart. But in cutting him off, they cut off themselves, and that is a deep grief.

"Yet there can be great gain, for they can gain a true perspective on fallenness, and see that those we call the Goyim—or Unclean Peoples—are as they now are, cut off from the normal standard of Lahveh's people. Thus they can weep for those who weep—and not all tears are evil. And if that barrier is removed, as is likely, they will re-enter normal society, and love it the more for having been apart, and the camp will celebrate.

"And finally, they play a prophetic part. For I foresee a time when one shall arise, as I arose. Another Moysh, people will say. But this prophet shall lead a new escape, not from any mortal land, but from the land of spiritual darkness. Then the Sheep of Lahveh will be redefined, and many who were spiritually Goyim will become spiritually Sheep; and many who were ethnically Sheep will be spiritually Goyim." Moysh sat quietly now, his head bowed, as new thoughts streamed through his head.

Umi and Zima glanced at each other. It is funny how telepathics can have that habit. Of course, a habit is all it is. They have no need to speak by facial, bodily, language. But ever since the vampires took the shape of the firstborn in the First Age—of which only the sindeldi remain in this world—they have mimicked the gestures of the Children of Usen. As they do not give birth to their own kind, and some are killed, they decrease in numbers, and so it is all the more important that they fit in with man, and conceal their true identities. And their facial gestures said better than telepathy could, that it was time to leave Moysh to his muse. He had not nodded off—perhaps he

soon would—but he had slipped out of the conscious realm, and become opaque to their presence. “We learn much,” whispered Zima “perhaps even of a Seventh Age”, and Umi nodded. He had meant to enquire about the realm of animals—why were some deemed kosher, and some unkosher?

Even the vampires do not understand all things, though they have a wisdom based on the billennia of their lives. But their own wisdom has been warped by hostile assumptions about Usen. These two were opening up to the idea that he had reasons, yes, benevolent reasons, for at least much of what he said and did. His wisdom had seemed foolish to them, but then perhaps their greatest wisdom had been foolish even compared to his greatest folly. And folly he had, for is it not folly to seek the best even for those who seek your worst? But could that folly make them wise?

Moyshe pondered his instructions: “I see. Camels, though they chew the cud but are not cloven-footed, and pigs, though they have hooves but do not chew the cud, are both symbolically unclean, since only beasts having both attributes symbolise the norm. Great is your wisdom, Lah.”

The people had camped. Their delegation now met representatives of the Emoreusok for a parley. "My lords," began Kalev, "neither we nor our divinity have any designs now on your land, nor do we seek to trouble your people. Safe passage is all we seek. Is it not known that we sought as much and no more, from the Edomaca? Is it not known that rather than violate our kinship with them, we passed by to their east, buying from them provisions with pure silver? Indeed we skirted the land of the Mooabim, neither seeking land nor stealing water. Now, therefore, please permit your servants to pass through your land."

The parley did not last long. The Emoreusok seemed stuck on the ideas that not being kin, they would not be treated as friends; that even the kin of Edoma had not trusted the Ivrim; that the Ivrim might have conserved their military capability for conquest of their land.

Soon the camp representatives returned. Kalev hurriedly reported directly to Moysh. His face was grave, showing his disappointment and the grave danger. That day, many a heart was beaten down by Giant Despair. So many had perished in the wilderness; a whole generation wiped out. Now, would they have to return? Or would they stand and fight like men? Surely better to die by sword than by snake. Actually the camp would have rebelled had Moysh ordered their return, and Moysh might have rebelled had he been told to.

But the swift reply of the Emoreusok was soon seen outside of the camp, for their troops began to form. Had all their troops marshalled the same day, the Ivrim would have been hard pressed. But at first the Emoreusok merely mounted a holding operation, dissuading any ingestion by the Ivrim. Once they mustered their full strength, they meant to mount a full-scale attack, killing the men and capturing the women, children, livestock, and silver.

Sichon their king had immediately sent word to Óggal, a strong king within their people. Óggal, he knew, always took far too much time to make his own mind up, so he then sent word, ordering Mooab, whom he accounted a vassal, to strengthen his army. Indeed he deemed it just to demand such assistance from Mooab, since that people had assisted the Ivrim by selling them supplies, allowing them

to freely venture within striking distance of the Emoreusok. Idly picking up a stone, Sichon threw it at a bat perched on his tent.

Umi and Zima had been committed to non-interference, whether for or against the Ivrim. However, they had switched to a bias towards, a tendency to help the people. However, their help had to be hidden. None, not even Moysh, must discover that they were vampires. Though fading away, stories were still being told, mother to child, of the dreadful Nephilim War, and of a vampire chief whom the world would later know as Count Dracula. Khem resounded with bedtime stories of Lilith, or simply of a spotted leopard who drank the blood of babies in the night. Grown up men waved away such stories as old wives' tales, not fit for the waking world. Yet old wives were wiser.

No, neither Umi nor Zima would awaken old and dangerous dreams, but in the night Umi flew unerringly to the tent of Balakas, king of the Mooabim. As a bat he crawled under the flaps, and perched on the king's bed. He neither enslaved Balakas, nor drained him of blood. He merely put deep thoughts within his mind, thoughts which would stand against any opposition raised by other tribal elders, who would no doubt discuss the summons from Sichon of the Emoreusok. In all of this, Umi worked alongside Zima. Courting such danger was uncharacteristic of her. If Lilith ever found out, she and Umi would possibly be eliminated for violating the Kingdom of Night. Neutrality was key: neither harm nor heal. Zima had moved rapidly from plans to eliminate Umi, to a plan which might eliminate her. Somehow, she now wished to please Usen: had she truly found her heart?

As for Balakas, king of the Mooabim, he awoke with new thoughts in his head. He had gone to bed, fully intending to obey the summons of Sichon. After all, if he pleased his master, maybe his people would be treated better by the Emoreusok, and even given land back. But his thoughts of the morning were now very different. The council elders had met, and most sided with Sichon.

But Balakas was now facing the other way. He refused to budge. After all, he argued, the Ivrim had not troubled their border farmers, and had seemingly paid generously for essential supplies. Besides, having been beaten into submission by the Emoreusok, why should they pull out all the stops to promote their petty war, a war of their own

making? They had been asked for safe passage. They had decided to attack. Let them fight their own battles. Anyway, if both sides fought it out, Mooab might emerge stronger than both. It would be nice to regain their former land, forcibly taken by the Emoreusok.

Having had replies from Óggal and Balakas, Sichon realised that he had to rely on his own troops. But resentment was his—he would repay. Both Óggal and Balakas claimed that they needed more time to assemble weapons and train their troops, for their people had been busy with dealing with the late harvest. A few more weeks and they would happily assemble. Bah! But Sichon would not wait. Indeed he was known for his hastiness—Balakas had counted on that.

So, with his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate, Sichon spearheaded an attack with what troops he had. But to his surprise, the Ivrim proved more battle-hardened than he had anticipated. And strange problems thwarted his best strategies, so that before long the judgement of Lahveh fell upon him: the slain of Lahveh were many.

Bereft of command, many of the troops then simply turned tail and fled, throwing down their weapons, or were put to the sword on the field of battle. Of those who fled, King Óggal killed many as deserters, and took many to bump up his troops. He realised, too late, that he should have supported Sichon: *two are better than one*—as he had said to his second wife long before his first wife had died. But it was no use crying over spilt blood, and he must attack or be attacked. Victory would establish him as the great king of the Emoreusok.

But before long, he too went down in battle, and the Ivrim were now minded to take the land of the Emoreusok in war reparation. Besides, Lahveh himself had spoken, giving permission to acquire the land. It was a massive gain in land and livestock, but the inhabitants weren't allowed to remain there, no not even as slaves. Great was the bed of Óggal, a rich trophy indeed, for he himself would no longer lie within with a wife at his side and with a guard at his feet. No, he had made his own bed of a very different kind, and would lie in it until Usen awakens the dead.

The foreigners who had travelled with the Ivrim, had sent a delegation to Moysh, begging leave to take up residence in this new land. Moysh had considered it, had truly prayed about it, yet turned

them down. No, they would not get their own land, but would be allowed to settle down as paid servants within the land of Chenán. But so far they had not fought alongside the Ivrim to gain that passageway or to protect its flank. Their time to do so would soon come. "But," added Moysh, "I see neither Yambress nor Yanness among you. It is said that they are to you as chief counsellors, so I find it strange that they do not appear before me."

Evil-doers are oft evil-dreaders. When that word was reported in the camp of foreigners, Yanness and Yambress were disconcerted. "Does it mean that Moysh has discovered how we plotted against him? Does he mean to winkle us out from this camp, to lay hands upon us suddenly?" They had long suspected that investigations might have traced them to the evil suspicions against Moysh and Arawon. Now, with victories behind him, had Moysh decided to deal with them with a heavy hand?

That evening, they stole out of the foreign camp, heading south on stolen camels and into Mooab, *for, they said, if we can stir up Mooab against the Ivrim, even now Pharaoh might rejoice to welcome us back.* And soon, regaled in their tokens of magic office, they were taken to the royal tent, to the tent of Balakas, king of the Mooabim, and offered spiced wine and fresh fruit. Women danced before them, for they were of the magic circle.

"Most noble Balakas," began Yambress, "may your days never end. And yet even now an enemy lurks at your border, a wolf whose belly is full of the Emoreusok, yet whose hunger is insatiable. Behold, let him be asked if he seeks to gobble you up in his pride, and he shall swear by his divinity that he is forbidden to seek your land. But is it not clear that he cannot go further west, and therefore must move south and possess your land?"

Balakas remained seated. These were great men, but hadn't come to him from Pharaoh, but from the Ivrim. He would listen; he would not honour. "My guests, it is my understanding that they have lands to the north which they could possess. Why then should they seek my land? Moreover, they did pass by, paying fairly for services rendered. Would you have me attack as foes, they who might be friends?"

Yanness it was who spoke: "Most noble Balakas, know that we have long journeyed with those people, at the behest of mighty Pharaoh—whose reign must not and shall not know end. For when those people rebelled,

it was planned to let them repent in bitterness their folly, and return freely into slavery. Thus we were commissioned to offer smooth counsel, that those witless sheep might witful be. Many have heeded our advice, and sought to return in obeisance. Though we could not turn them in full, we have culled them in part, for if Pharaoh—all praise to him—shall not gain, Iahveh at least shall lose. And thus your enemies are fewer than otherwise would have been. And for that we deserve your thanks.

“However, now we come unto you with wisdom. Will you harken to our counsel, we, who are loyal counsellors to Khem?”

Balakas rose now, and bowed low, as to ambassadors from Khem. “What then is your counsel? Must I attack the Ivrim? Am I now mightier than those who defeated me, and whom the Ivrim have defeated?”

Yambress replied, “My king, by my counsel, you should seek aid from the south, even of the people of Madyan with whom you trade, to swell your numbers. Thus your northern border will be beefed up, and the Ivrim will think twice before attacking. For if you fall, will not the Madyanyo be next, trampled down and tormented, as if by a wild bull which licks up the very grass from good soil?”

“Yes,” said Yanness, “and send also for Balaram the Soothsayer. For is he not mighty in magic? Even we who are old, are but sons unto him in magic. Did he not even appear before the face of Pharaoh, strengthening his arm against the Nine Bows? Indeed his deeds have gone out to the four ends of the earth, and his sight to the four winds. For though even we could not stand against the magic of Moysh, Balaram is more than his master. If therefore he shall put a curse upon Moysh, shall that curse not stand, and the legs of his people turn to water?”

Balakas sat a while in thought. “Then, you propose that I close my ears to the Ivrim, raise the Madyanyo as a shield, and Balaram as a sword?” The two magicians rose as one, and yeasaid him. Still he pondered. If they were right—these chief magicians of Pharaoh—then the threat was both genuine and serious. It would do no harm to at least defend his land with an ally less strong than he. Yet his own spies said that Moysh had married into the Madyanyo, besides being distantly kin. So would summoning them as friends, be summoning them as foes?

Yet the two magicians naysaid that. For, they said, Moysh had himself poisoned the daughter of Ragèl, a priest of Madyan, in order to marry her maid. For the Ivrim men—they said—now refused to wed while

a wife still lived. And moreover—they said—they had seen with their own eyes, a most murderous attack on his own brother-in-law Hobabit, who after Ragèl's death, had become his father-in-law. For Hobabit, having been a guide within the wilderness, had lost his use, and had harboured suspicions of Moysh. All this, they promised, they would testify to the Madyanyo.

Lies, all lies, but successful lies. But are not successful lies better than unsuccessful truths? But so it was that Balakas set his face against Moysh. His words soon echoed among his people. In straight battle, the Ivrim had defeated the people who had defeated the Mooabim, who now expected their northern border to be overrun by a horde of warriors, hard, bold, and wicked. Needless was their fear, since the Ivrim had no designs of their land, but looked to expand west, then north and south from there. But in these fears the hand of Yanness and Yambress could be seen by those who had eyes to see. Kamos their divinity, saw the danger to his land, but spoke not a word.

The weeks had flown by. The Ivrim had had victory after victory, mopping up towns, and consolidating their gains. Guards had been sent out north and south to protect against incursion, for those who had been held at bay by the Emoreusok, might now take their chance to lay claim to the debated land.

The Ivrim hoped for a time of respite, and some of their tribes aimed to settle down in that pastoral land, although their menfolk would continue west until a way into Chenán had been secured. Ambassadors had gone north and south to plea for peaceful relations. But while the northern border seemed secure, news came through from traders, that the Mooabim were stirring on the southern border. News came of the Madyanyo moving north. Moysh sent word to them that he himself was by marriage one with them. His words fell on deaf ears, ears deafened by the words of Yanness and Yambress, dark magicians under the sway of immortal Necuratu, the Dark Lord.

Thereupon, Moysh strengthened his southern flank. Meanwhile, Balaram, an international soothsayer from Péthorból, who claimed that he could charm all divinities by his spells, was summoned to stand against the Ivrim. Personally he was happy to sell his curses and blessings to the highest bidder, and he always had powerful clients hammering on his doors. Wherever he went to work his magic, the international community always knew where to find him. But too late that evening, had the Hand of Mooab sought him out. He was never in a rush to catch his fish who sought to catch him. All knew that he played hard to get.

He had retired early for the night, after only a few preliminaries. His guests were lodged in a nearby house. He had dined alone. He had been asked to undermine a people called Ivrim, whose sole divinity was called Lahveh. Well, any people with only one divinity, should make the job simple and easy. That evening, he had invoked that divinity, using its personal name, but as yet no word had come to him. He hadn't expected any word to be spoken. He'd think of something suitable after a good night's sleep—maybe examine a few entrails before breakfast, and check out some avian flights first.

But then, in the dark of night, word came to him as he slept. It was as if a light shone around the room, yet he could neither open his eyes nor rise from his bed. A voice asked who his guests were. With unmoving lips he replied that they had come from the king of Mooab, to pay him handsomely to hex the hostile Ivrim, and so to rally the opposition. The Voice then warned him, that that would be opposing Iahveh himself. If he cursed them, let Balaram curse them; but he had blessed them, let not Balaram curse them. Otherwise...

That morning, his mind had done a *volte-face*. Bribing or cajoling a silent divinity to turn against its people, was all well and good—he had done that many a time without any real objection. In fact, merely to go through the motions was enough to embolden his clients to fight the harder and to gain success, if he blessed them or cursed their enemies. Self-fulfilling prophecy is a powerful tool. But he knew that beyond psychology, he hosted diaboloi, spirits of power who, by helping swing victory and defeat, could sometimes predict outcomes, and who kept him safe. Balaram's reputation was riding high.

But Iahveh had penetrated his defences—his nightly charms and guide spirits that had always warded off the spirits of the night. Chillingly that meant that this unknown power could as easily strike him down as could a thief in the night. This Guardian was unambiguous: the Ivrim were under his blessing; Balaram had better not go cursing them. And since he couldn't control Iahveh, it was best to back off. Therefore to Mooab, Balaram said No.

But *No* is not always a *No*. Sometimes it is a, *Try harder*. Therefore Balakas sent a richer more regal embassage. Again Balaram seemed to procrastinate, doubtless playing some silly little game for greater gain. *Not even if you offer me a palace full of silver*, meant *Offer me at least a tent full of silver, and I'll be there*. He was annoying yet he was worth it. You got what you paid for. And it worked like a charm. He came. But he came with a story, like some nightmare of the night to up the fee.

Firstly, he told Balakas that he had teamed up with this divinity. Well, perhaps that meant that he was scheming to coax it to swing its vote, and to give up the Ivrim. Divinities had been known to be fickle, and to switch to a stronger side, especially if their former worshippers had fallen out with them. If Balaram was paid enough, he could win over

the Guardian of the Ivrim, who had helped them defeat the Emoreusok. Balakas would give a palace of gold to gain such power.

Secondly, he told Balakas a strange tale. "As I journeyed here, I split your men into two groups, a vanguard and a rearguard. And I rode on my donkey, alongside my servants. And on that journey, I, who account myself a mighty seer, did prove but blind, and my dumb beast of burden did prove itself wiser than I in sight and in speech. This is the power of Iahveh, who upholds the Ivrim in his mighty hand.

"For know that my heart conspired to twist his thoughts to my thoughts, and his ways to my ways. And yet in my waking ways he knew my thoughts, and was ill-pleased. And it came to pass that on the way, my donkey veered off the road, disobedient to my will. I beat her with a rod to hide my anger, for my servants beheld my plight and grinned.

"Yet soon after, we passed between vineyards to the left and to the right, walled off from the path. Then she veered towards a wall, and I cried in pain, for badly she bruised a heel of mine against heartless stone. This time I spared not the rod of correction, but thrashed her soundly.

"Yet again, as we came to a narrow pass, she refused to enter the valley, and sank down below me. For this I thrashed her with vigour and then, and then she spoke to me in the language of man. Or at least her lips moved, and words of my people came forth. I have heard rumours of such things among the phusika, that some men have even witnessed conies speaking warnings unto them. And now I believed.

"For she witnessed against me, and upbraided me with her tongue. 'Behold,' she said, 'why do you treat me ill for treating you well?' And though most amazed, I was yet the more angry, and justified myself as one embarrassed beyond endurance. For beheld, by my servants, my donkey had made ass of me. Moreover, in my folly I told her that if any sword was at hand, I would slay her without remorse.

"Then she laughed at me, the laugh of but an ass. 'For,' she said, 'have I ever offended you before, that you expect such treatment from me?' And I said, No. And then behold, she looked behind me, and I turned and saw a sword there. Yet I took it not to slay her, for a mighty among the aggeloi held it in his hand, and I fell down in homage before him.

"And then he spoke, telling me that thrice my donkey had saved me from his sword. For, he said, my inner thoughts were known by Iahveh, and his anger was towards me. Then in fear I swore that at his word I would

foreswear my journey to you, O king. But, he said, being brought to proper fear of Lahveh was the beginning of wisdom, and in wisdom I was to come unto you. Howbeit, my lord king, I may only speak what he will speak unto me."

Balakas stood in wonder, and stared at the donkey, as if she might suddenly speak to him. But she simply looked in his eyes, and hoped never again to have to enter in to the speech of man. It had opened her eyes, however, as to their intelligence, which she had doubted till now. Yet they were so blind in other ways. Why, they might claim to see fern-seed, but for the life of them seemingly they couldn't see an aggelos at ten yards away in broad daylight. Still, smart, at least to the extent that they could actually talk, and from what she could remember of those words, they enjoyed an excellent vocabulary. But she had found forming those words quite difficult. They had been fashioned for different jaws, not for proper jaws like hers.

Balakas stood and wondered. Yes, Balaram was hobbling, but was he spinning a yarn for higher wages? Best to discreetly quiz his servants: had they seen this aggelos; had they heard the ass? It was of course possible. After all, all knew that animals of sky or of land—the phusika—possessed a certain quickness and acuity of perception, thus sensing some things that lay beyond the realm of man. It was said that their ears could hear infrasound, even the slow everlasting groan of over-burdened stone. Divination itself was based on that belief, examining the innards of the more sensitive animals which orientated in the way that the divinities were headed. And Balaram was good at reading the signs. Even the twitching of entrails, spoke volumes to him—or so it was said.

But for now, it was time for the business of the day. It was said that to the spirit-world, location mattered. Balakas had a number of towns lined up for his honoured guest, but hopefully he'd get lucky with the first one. The more towns needed, the bigger the bill.

The first up town seemed fine. Some animals were butchered, both to make a fine meal, but more importantly to the mission, to allow the seer to divine the innards of the sacrificed. Birds of prey soon gathered for their share of the livers, the seat of emotion. Though a bird-reader, he heeded them not. Balaram had divination down to a fine art, but often added dramatic flair to his investigations of

sacrificed animals, muttering as he went about how smooth, or not, were their entrails, and whether or not the colour of their gall pleased the powers, and gibbered on about liver-lobes and thigh bones. He made it clear that few could be relied upon to do as thorough a job.

But at the back of his mind there was a niggle. Unbeknown to him the Ruach himself was at his side; his own guide spirits had fled from him. Balaram had been tempted to add his donkey to the pile of animals sacrificed for the divination—it was, after all, close to the spirit-world. But perhaps the Ruach had defended that old donkey.

This time, Balakas was disappointed. The town lacked spiritual inspiration. They moved on to the next border town. You could see the enemy from there. This town worked, but worked in the wrong way. The omens were all wrong. Against his commission, the diviner had the gall to speak a blessing upon the Ivrim, not a curse, for they were obedient to Lahveh and therefore didn't fit in with others. He even had a fleeting wistfulness to join them! How could Balakas urge his soldiers to attack an internationally blessed people?

A third town was tried—more like a hamlet, really. Yet more blood and guts. Yet again Balaram hoped the message would be different, perhaps shielded by local powers from Lahveh, or some compromise reached with him. He was disappointed again, and it seemed to him that unlike mortal man, Lahveh was neither liar nor fickle. No, while the Sheep were pure, the Shepherd-king would not damn them. Balakas, though, now wished to damn old Balaram, for if he wasn't going to curse them, at least he had no right to bless them. Was he getting paid to dishearten Balakas' people; to dethrone their king?

A fourth town was tried. If Balaram was working for the Ivrim, would it be best to assassinate him? But that might bring repercussions from other nations, since they held him to be of international value. This time, after sacrifices, Balaram didn't even bother to potter away to privately persuade Lahveh. He simply awaited the unction he had experienced before, though he knew not what spirit so inspired him. Vision was given to him, and he saw more clearly that to bless the Ivrim, was to be blessed; to curse the Ivrim, was to be cursed. "Do you wish to be cursed?" he asked Balakas.

King Balakas snapped. He could have killed him there and then in his fury. And he knew that he would now, unless Balaram turned tail and ran helter-skelter for home. Not one ring of silver would he get for his evil counsel. But Balaram wasn't the nervous kind. He had the audacity to stand and say what perhaps he might have said at the first town: he spoke of a future king of the Ivrim appearing like a new star; about Mooab's skull being cracked wide open; about others who stood there representing Mooab's alliance, as crumbling into dust. With that off his chest, he turned his back on the king, mounted his donkey, and calmly rode off, staff in hand.

Balakas watched him go, then he turned to Yanness and Yambress. "Death is your wage, for by your counsel I summoned the soothsayer, who has sided with my enemy. However, serve me now and you will have rich reward, and the enemy of Pharaoh will yet fall."

"Go, take a dozen of my men. But heed me carefully, and let no word of this ever be heard beyond my lips. Go quietly after Balaram, only do not be seen. On the second night, slay him and his servants and donkey, as they sleep. Make it seem that the Ivrim crossed the border and slew him. Thus we may say that they double-crossed him, paying him death for his services, and my men will be enheartened to fight."

And so it was that the two magicians in fear and trepidation, took a small company of guards, with one outrider as scout, and followed after Balaram at a distance. On the second night, the Mooabim stole into the tent of Balaram, quickly overpowering him and his servants. Quickly they informed him that his death would bring a curse upon the Ivrim. Quickly he replied that he had a better plan.

"Only let me live," he pleaded, "and I myself will go with you into the camp of the Ivrim. Only let us go as bringers of gifts from Mooab. Let the gift be of wine, women, and warble—I have contacts with the Madyan, who are well skilled in the sacred arts. Share sacrificial meat with them. Let them violate their covenant. For although Lahveh has pledged to bless them, that is based purely on their covenant loyalty to him. What if they switch allegiance, and side with other divinities? Will Lahveh not curse his sheep, and shall you not harry them to their deaths? Then will Mooab not regain the land it lost to the Emoreusok, and much more? Then will the king not honour me, and you with me?"

Yanness and Yambress readily agreed with this, and spent much time in planning for such an incursion into the Ivrim. They had entrée, but they needed to keep well clear of Moysh. Now Balaram seemed not so bad in their eyes. He had blessed the Ivrim with his right hand, seen by Lahveh. He would curse the Ivrim with his left hand, unseen by Lahveh. Balaram had been compelled to bless them; now Lahveh would be compelled to curse them. For all his whining as if a frightened cur, he had billed them for much gold and silver for his help in making the plan succeed. He was no fool.

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Days had gone by. Though yesterday some pockets of resistance were fought, most of the Emoreusok had fled over the border into Chenán, spreading fear. Things were going well. Moysh had had an excellent breakfast, but a busy morning. He was having a quiet time when I'hoshua silently approached. "My lord, you forbid us to attack the Mooabim, yet I fear that, fearing us, they will attempt a pre-emptive strike. Have you heard the rumour from our southern camps, that a soothsayer has been called to encourage Mooab and her allies to rally to attack us? Therefore permit me to strengthen our southern border—unless you fear that that will spark the very swarm we seek to avoid."

Moysh thought a little while. On balance, it might be better to send more soldiers south, but to pitch these additional camps just out of sight, close enough to rapidly strengthen the border patrol at a pinch, but not close enough to provoke attack. Already a fairly sizeable force was stationed there, under the experienced command of the older of the elders from among the people. *Lahveh has not ordered any more; trust Lahveh*, Moysh reminded himself.

Unbeknown to Moysh, young men and women, dressed as peasant traders, had been invited into the southern border camps, and apostacy was trickling through them. Yanness and Yambress had first crossed the border from Mooab. They had claimed to have been sent as backdoor ambassadors from Moysh. Word was not yet to be sent back to Moysh, until diplomacy had played its fuller part. It was an unstable position, they said. And thus Moysh was not informed that these magicians were among the southern border camps, nor were the camps warned against the magicians. They had a power of speech, well able to persuade the simple.

Soon, Yanness and Yambress introduced the traders, who were given welcome in all the camps. Fresh supplies were welcome, but especially of wine, of which the Ivrim were again short. For the Ivrim had only brought one cartload from Khem, and though replenished along the way, stocks were limited to only very special occasions, and were running low. The guards had never really tasted wine, not proper wine, that is. Slaves were seldom wined and dined in Khem.

And now, cheap yet choice blue-waterlily wine, flowed unstintingly, and the lads and lasses serving were extremely charming, perhaps a tad too charming. Before long, the men had drunk enough to be merrily disinhibited. And now the gentle caressing wine of lips, was offered to them. The foreign ladies bewitchingly explained that this was the custom of Mooab and of her allies, and pleased Fegor, the divine master who watched over that land. He would be pleased, so let their love be consummated before Fegor himself.

And let them eat too, in token of their host. Would their wise leader begrudge them a few animals to be sacrificed so that they, his worthy soldiers, might feast on meat? Surely not! As for sharing their love, it was their pleasure to entertain such brave men who had defeated their common enemy, the Emoreusok, and had won over their hearts. Between the Mooabim and the Ivrim, let there be bliss. As to their wives and children, why, they would rejoice if the loving advances of Mooab were welcomed with open arms.

And then Balaram, of international fame, stood up, and told how he personally had persuaded the king of Mooab to bless the Ivrim. Yes, Balaram had come to them to testify that he had himself—like Moysh—spoken with Lahveh, and that therefore all was now right between them and Mooab: *partake now of our gifts to you*, were his words to them. And they were happy to bewhore themselves. After all, men were made to live on love, not war. And so the Ivrim were yoked to Baálnak Fegor. But Lahveh blazed against Israel.

And even as a tongue of fire, lit by Necuratu himself, can set ablaze a mighty forest, so the fire of madness swept through camp after camp. Each camp craved the kindly words of the magicians of Moysh, those deceitful snakes, and word and women sped gayly through the border camps. *Moysh will be pleased*, they tried telling each other. And if

more say a thing, does it not become more true, until what once was not believed by many, is believed by most, so must be true for all?

And reinforcements who came from I'hoshua, were likewise charmed to praise a peaceful settlement with Mooab. Moysh had definitely said that he didn't wish to fight Mooab. Wishing to be deceived, the men partook of the women, and of the unkosher meat in unholy allegiance to Baálnak Fegor. They rejoiced that hard times had ended; that Moysh had led them into a pleasant land. Praised be Moysh! Alas, that so many of the older generation had ever doubted him.

And Moysh might now have looked forward to a happy retirement, honoured by his people at last. But when news reached him, he tore his garments in protest. He now understood the strange malady afflicting the camp, the reports beginning to flow of Ivrim taking to their beds, some dying. Why hadn't anyone told him sooner? He commanded horns to be blown, to quickly summon the camp elders to the holy tent. There the word from Iahveh was devastating: *butcher every leader who encouraged this rebellion; hang up their corpses for all to see.*

The rebellion was still spreading. After consultation, Moysh and the camp elders were just departing, when a new disturbance arose. Seeing an incoming procession bedecked with foolish pride, they stood stock still, aghast. For there before their eyes, a bawdily dressed foreign priestess approached. She flaunted herself as a somebody, yet her mind was as the bed of an animal, and her heart had returned to the dust from which it came. Now in a festive parade of pride, to the very entrance to the priestly tent she led her mate. Though a highborn of the Ivrim, he had turned his back on the rising from the animal kingdom, and had fallen below Adán, the primeval priest.

Why had they come? There was neither need to ask their names nor their business, for as they barged by, their bodyguards proudly proclaimed as a chant: "Hail the high priestess Kozba, daughter of Zurin of the Madyan people, and her master, Zimris, son of Saluvo of the Ivrim people. Behold, the sky cleaves to the land, and the land rejoices in the sky. Behold, at this holy site, Baálnak Fegor greets Baálnak Iahveh, master of the Ivrim people. Thus shall they too be joined, and sky and land shall rejoice as one." Moysh immediately guessed the endgame:

racial absorption, intermarriage, trade, interfaith worship, exclusive covenant violated and annulled. A calamity beyond imagination.

But the nowgame was bad enough. That a foreigner had forced her way into the camp was bad enough. But what madness, or promise of power, had possessed Zimris? Were his eyes still set on being high priest? Did he hope that a coalition with Iahveh would grant him his wish? What madness possessed the man? For he and that woman were disporting in primeval dance, two fools prancing about within their circle of protection, moaning as mules in season, abominably like sheep and mule yoked together. It is just too horrible to describe. Had they no sense of shame, or was the abnormal normal within Mooab's religion? Was Chenán as evil as this? His mind frenetic, but his feet frozen, Moysh threw up his hands in holy horror.

But Pinhasa, born grandson to Arawon, would not for a moment stand still for such nonsense. By its toleration and celebration, the camp was gormlessly gyrating on a spiritual slope, cheering meaningless madness as fools taught by Dame Folly. True, Moysh had taken a Madyanyo daughter of a priest in marriage—until death did them part. But Zimris had been taken by a Madyanyo priestess, certainly not in marriage as it really was—and no union can be marriage unless defined so by Usen, even if perversely defined as marriage by Mooab society—and their union boded the death of their spiritual identity.

He sprang forward towards the vaulted canopy at the tent entrance, he, a star, a sceptre, a smiter of Mooab, a mighty man. At such an unexpected rush the bodyguard stood transfixed—opposition were expected to roll over and die, not to protest. Their slowness cost them their lives. Crashing into one, he grabbed the guard's spear, and with the speed of a snake and lunge of a lion, thrust it through the adulterous man's back and into the woman's belly.

At the fatal fall of the high priestess, some of the crowd now took courage and cheered. Those who had cheered before, now awoke from their madness and stood silent in shame. Now supporters of Moysh rushed to support Pinhasa, who stood alone surrounded by the bodyguard from Mooab. Swiftly the fight was over. The bodyguard fought well for their lives, but were outnumbered and fell.

Moysh shouted for all who sided with Iahveh, to take up arms against their sea of troubles, and by opposing end them. That one act was like the bursting of a festering boil; the reversal of an ill wind; a fundamental mood swing towards sanity. Reclothed in their right minds, *en masse* the people suddenly shook off the mists of madness, opened their eyes, and a counter revolution, a restoration, began. Immediately there was a pushback, with the Ivrim from the main camp surging like a tide southward, driving back the darkness of Mooab. Its confusion about Baálnak Fegor was its own problem to sort out, not one to confuse those of Iahveh. They carried the day.

It was noticeable when looking back, that the malaise that had swept over them, had ended more or less when they had turned against the foe. Looking back, that had been the last plague, the end of the dying of the older generation. Now they were all gone, along with the rebel magicians, whom Pinhasa had personally put to the sword. Some told of Umi and Zima, overpowering their former colleagues first—though such reports seemed a little unclear. But like a spectre in the night, the diviner had fled past the startled border camps, to devise more mischief against the Ivrim—he had made this personal. It soon became clear that he was evil of heart, no mere scallywag.

Had the malaise come from Iahveh; had it been stopped by Pinhasa? What was certain was that according to Moysh, Iahveh had been so pleased with this priest, that he had sworn that his descendants would continue in perpetuity as the high priestly line—subject of course to the normal loyalty conditions of covenants. Also, the two righteous magicians, Umi and Zima, had been honoured by Moysh as righteous among the nations, and granted the freedom of the camp.

Both Madyan and Mooab were now officially enemies of the Ivrim: enmity can work both ways. Indeed, such a dirty and dire attack on their core identity, had categorised them as ripe for destruction as nations, too dangerous to be left to foster new aggression. To let them flee or fight, was just. Moysh himself was a little too old to accompany the troops, but he now had proven generals who loyally understood the ways of Iahveh. He would guide them.

For his part, Moysh remained in the camp, while a retaliatory campaign was fought. Let the younger people fight. His part now was more of a teacher, for there were still some things to teach the people for life in Chenán, and he knew that his time was short. For the former things had all but passed away, and all things would become as new. The next generation would be buried in the soil, not in sand.

A new census was carried out, confirming the absence of those forbidden to dwell in Chenán. It was heartening that though multiple thousands had died, their children grown into adulthood had all but caught up in numbers. While Iahveh stuck loyally to them, even the baleful Pits of Shéol couldn't swallow them up. But, Moysh wondered, might the former generation bespeak the future of his people? Would the new fall as did the former, and also come to be might-have-beens? People is people. Prophetically, might the second generation bespeak a future people, a different people of Iahveh? It came unbidden into his head that there had been an earlier exodus of his people.

His ancestor Terach, had intended to go with his son, Avraam, into Chenán. Similarly from Khem, the first generation had intended to go with their children into Chenán. In olden days, Terach had died before reaching that promised land. Similarly, the cursed census generation would fully die out before reaching that sworn land—even Moysh had fallen under that curse, and his fate was the fate of Terach. In olden days, Avraam entered Chenán. And now—like Avraam—leading the second census generation, I'hoshua would enter Chenán. In olden days, the Chenán which Avraam entered, was but a weak shadow. And now, the Chenán which I'hoshua would enter, was to that shadow its reality, its fulfilment.

But what if the Chenán beyond this river, was itself only a shadow of what was to come? Even as the spiritual level had upgraded between Terach, moon worshipper, and Avraam, Iahveh worshipper, would there be another cyclic upgrade, a deeper worship? Would there be a new level of Moysh, of I'hoshua, even as Avraam had been a new level of Terach? Would there be a new level of Chenán? Could I'hoshua give the true rest? Did our souls demand more than he could deliver?

No, all that was too much for his old head to take in. He'd had such bewildering thoughts flitter through his mind before. But what settled in his mind, was a vision of a new Moysh, a new prophet, transcending national bounds. He took up a quill and a sheepskin hide, and began to scribble down some points to expand later: *Iahveh will give you, my people, a prophet like me. Heed that prophet. Deceivers might claim to be prophets; you must discern this prophet. He will mediate for you. He will tell you what he hears Iahveh speak. He will not speak to you of new divinities—any prophets who do so will deserve to die. He will not mislead you about the future.*

What with the old stories handed down by word of mouth or by written word, and the new revelation, Moysh was kept busy writing weighty tomes. And what a lot of new material had already come his way. With a wry smile he put down his quill. He really wished they had heeded him. Would that future prophet weep unheeded?

But questions about the future, soon gave way to questions about the now, and Moysh assembled his generals. Once seated, they drew up their plans. The Mooabim totally deserved to die, but would still be allowed to live beyond the pale. Perhaps some allowance was made for the genuine fears of that people—they had been deceived. But their ally, the Madyanyo, had acted beyond the pale—they had deceived, and wilfully raised the avenging sword of Iahveh against his own, counting on his covenant vengeance in line with their covenant violation. The Madyanyo had ignored the plea of Moysh. They had repudiated the blood tie between them, even with Avraam their common ancestor. For that they must be punished. Plans were laid.

For this expedition, Moysh put Kalev in overall command—I'hoshua would remain to command the main force of the army. And for things spiritual, Pinhasa would assume command. A symbolic force of 12,000 would make the journey to Madyan—a sizeable chunk of the

fighting force, but representing equally the twelve tribes which had been undermined. It was now well stocked with military supplies from its victories, including horses and camels and beasts of burden.

It was reckoned that about two weeks of hard travel should take the taskforce to Madyan, and give it some element of surprise. The land would be ravaged, but the land would not be gained. No, this was a punitive and defensive action against a snake that might yet again bite the heel of the Ivrim; a warning to the surrounding nations, not to seek to ensnare the chosen of Lahveh. The generals left to prepare.

Umi and Zima were watching. Now welcomed guests within the camp, Moysh would have welcomed both into the worship of Lahveh, a worship which precluded all other powers. Their allegiance to him seemed increasingly clear, but that was for them to decide. Umi would have to undergo a small ritual involving a little gain of pain and loss of blood—but what was a little blood to the likes of Umi? Still, perhaps under I'hoshua they would become one with the Ivrim. For now, Moysh simply smiled warmly when they entered his tent.

"Hail, my lord Moysh", saluted Umi.

"I greet you both. My tent is your tent, so long as I live within the tent of my flesh", said Moysh to them.

"Most reverend lord," asked Zima, alerted by his strange reply, "have you had news of your departure?" Hardly had she gotten to know him, but in that brief moment of time, she had become strangely warmed to him. Umi had said something like that only the other day, when they were still in Khem and Moysh had been a servant to Pharaoh. Time flowed so quickly. She and he had both aged gracefully in the eyes of the Sheep. Just a few silver hairs, as was the vampire way to blend in. For them, age was no more real than makeup.

"Yes I have had news", he replied. He had a serious face. Did he object to being called away so soon? No, he replied. "After all, few have been blessed with so much as I have been. I shall not be without honour in the halls of my ancestors. For Lahveh, who raised me up, is the divinity of them still whose names we honour. Beyond the mortal pale, I shall dwell with them in honour, and my people whom I shall leave, will grieve and honour my name. I wonder whether I will be permitted to watch

over them, to see how they fare. But perhaps it is better that I do not. I am weary of such care, and forever witless are these sheep." He smiled. "Truly, my lord, we have heard of your halls beyond the fate of Arda. Your people will honour your bones, and place them with those of your forebears. And they shall surely visit your shrine, and lay tributes there. Though not—or so we have heard—tributes of flesh and drink, but of praise and gratitude." Umi bowed low.

"No, I would not put it like that", said Moysh reflectively. "For though I am to be gathered to my people, the bones of my body will forever lie unknown and unhonoured. For Lahveh has told me this: I shall ascend to the heights, and from there see with my own eyes, and not another's, my people's inheritance land. Another's hand shall guide them there, but on that mountain height my life shall be taken from my body, and from there I shall be taken and my body buried—by the hand of Lahveh."

Honour was key, thought Umi. You could see with the secondborn, that through euformation they would rise in honour, else through dysformation would fall below honour. How many of the chosen people had slowly dysformed, errant sheep whose hearts had sought pastures new, forsaking their shepherd? Through trial, Moysh was euiformed. And what, thought Umi, would his own fate be, and that of Zima, who now were reforming towards the Light? Might they meet again the Children of Usen, beyond the Door of Night?

The days went by. Reports filtered back of the raid on Madyan. The men were moving rapidly, camel riders as a vanguard. The road south seemed clear. At basecamp, Moysh and the priesthood were busy teaching the people; I'hoshua had direct control over military operations in mopping up pockets of opposition, in guarding the southern flank, and in training the fighting men under a combined command which respected their tribal allegiances.

The days rolled by. At long last the soldiers returned to the camp, proudly proclaiming their prowess—not a one had died in battle! Moysh welcomed them at the border. They had defeated multiple kings of Madyan, including he who had been father to Kozba, that nickname of infamy given to her by the Ivrim. In particular, they had come across Balaram, caught freshly arrived in Madyan and already scheming to avenge his reputation, and to gain his reward as yet

unpaid. His heart was revealed by many blows; his head was surrendered to Pinhasa; his staff was broken; his reward was just.

Many women and their sons and daughters were brought back to the camp. That, however, Moysh thought unwise. *For, he said, you can't tell which ones have played a part in the worship of the baáloknak. And the sons of such enemies may cause problems within your new land. Slay them now. Better safe than sorry. When the weeping has ended, and they are ripe, marry the younger women who have never pledged loyalty to any man. Our women will discern which women are such.*

He ordered the fair distribution of the surviving animals, and also of the booty won. And he also ordered the soldiers to ceremonially clean themselves before entering the camp, too, for careless attitude to the symbolic level, would contaminate the camp on a spiritual level. But as to allowing in certain types of people, why they would have endangered the kosher people of Iahveh on the social level—and the deeper more important. It was vital to enforce stern infection control, and Moysh foresaw that the scandal of the particular was longterm for the benefit of the global.

His orders gave his people a little more breather. On the southern border lay Mooab. The Mooabim would see the severity of the attack on their allies, and see that though a hard long-distance attack had been undertaken, an easier short-range attack on Mooab had not been attempted. This should reassure them that they were not under the ban of death—they could lower their shield. It should also warn them that unless they lowered their sword, Iahveh might attack—they would be easier to eradicate than the Madyanyo had been.

Not that they would be quickly forgotten or forgiven. Whereas they might marry into the Ivrim, long if ever would it be before any male line of the Mooabim might be welcome to celebrate in Iahveh's festal assembly. Only slowly would they ever achieve full citizenship. Resentment ran deep, and not just internationally.

As it was, after some heated misunderstanding by Moysh about quite reasonable negotiations, it had been settled that three of the tribes would settle down in full or in part, east of the big Giordano River, within their own boundaries. And their tribal land would be sacrosanct. They chose the fringe of the main garment of land—so to

speak—but earnestly explained that they had fully intended to help the rest of their people gain the garment west of the Giordano.

Each of these tribes to the sunrise side were to have a special town where Avengers of Blood would be excluded. Avengers had a noble duty to avenge murder of kin, in a society where every adult had a part to play in policing their own patch. But sometimes accidents, not attitude, led to death, and those responsible were permitted to claim refuge. It wasn't an ideal system, but then again, the world is never an ideal world. Once they gained their land to the sunset side, the remaining tribes would similarly set up some cities of sanctuary. Curiously, those under doom of death if they left, were deemed redeemed by the death of the high priest, as if that death were an atoning sacrifice, as if departing holiness left a gracious gift of life.

Within the week, Umi and Zima gathered with the main camp. Moysh stood up to make a major speech. Many things already spoken, were spoken again. It was as if he expected it to be his last address to the new nation. It covered a whole panoply of ideas and situations, based on ten core stipulations. Some things were of a global nature; some things were specific to the covenant. But all was to be heeded by the people. It was a most solemn occasion, though it brought hope and happiness. It had been accepted by the people.

In turn, Lahveh had reaffirmed his commitment to them: he would lead; they would follow. Their primary orientation would be around him, so all would be better than well. But Moysh would not go with them. He would not even reach the Giordano River with them, he said, but when they crossed they must prioritise two sites over on the two adjoining mountains of Gaebal and Garizin. Half the tribes would assemble on one; half on the other. The holy tribe, distinct from but at one with the Twelve, would stand on both.

From Gaebal, they would discourage one typical list of wrongdoings, and the tribes would agree. From Garizin, they would encourage one typical list of rightdoings, and the tribes would agree. There were sliding scales for overall obedience and for disobedience. In short, the greater their obedience to Lahveh, the greater his blessing, his teaching; the greater their disobedience to Lahveh, the greater his curse, his educative punishment and pruning upon them. On the one hand, tremendous abundance within the set parameters of their land.

On the other hand, they might even return to the slavery of Khem, their worst-case scenario. In short, celeries would encourage the good to be better; sticks would beg the bad to be good, to return rather to national obedience.

After all, besides helping each person within the nation to get to know Lahveh, national obedience to him meant more love towards one's neighbours—or at least fair treatment to all. Win, win. And so their society would care for itself, and flourish within secure borders. Ideally it would even be a clear light to the surrounding nations, of how human societies were meant to live—excepting that Lahveh had no immediate plans to adopt any other peoples into his covenant.

It had been a long talk, and many had grown weary. But it was written down, so they could be reminded now and again. “I wonder,” said Umi, “whether any of these people will ever live on the top of Garizin?”

Zima was not sanguine. “I suspect that they will live somewhere in the valley between. And that I guess is where Lahveh himself will expect them to live. But is that not just like the secondborn, seldom wishing to live too close to him? Did he not nominate the Sheep to be holy, only to select some to be holy? Perhaps some, like Moysh, will scale such awesome heights. But I fear that many more will find it easier to summit Mount Gaebal. Maybe the land will one day spew these people out.”

The two vampires returned to their tent. As magicians they had always shared one tent in the wilderness walk. That was simply accepted by the Ivrim, even by Moysh. And besides, they were foreigners and so not bound to the customs of the Sheep. And they had left Khem with more than sufficient funds to make them the wealthiest of the foreigners. Their servants brought them choice food and wine. As always, they dined only once the servants had departed—presumably a magician thing.

So, after some consolidation, the community plan was due to go forward. The land of Chenán was so morally bad that the land hosting the people, was sick of what it hosted. No mercy was to be shown to the peoples that made up the Chenánites. They were to be driven out. Unless all traces of them and their spirituality were removed, the sociality and spiritually of the holy Ivrim might be contaminated by the unholiness left behind, and in turn Lahveh might have to purge the land of them. Even the sacred art of Chenán was polluted.

So, if defeated, the Chenánites would all be killed, lock, stock, and barrel. If undefeated, they could flee the land—it wasn't theirs—or bed down and endure siege, or take the initiative and besiege the Ivrim. Be killed, kill, or clear out. Some would say that they were odds-on favourites to win, since they were more powerful than the Ivrim. Time would tell.

But as to nations which would become neighbours, why, the Ivrim were not interested in any holy war, whether to kill off rival religions, or to convert rival religionists. No, all they had in mind was a land war. That is, Lahveh himself had a plan to redistribute his land, removing the old tenants, and replacing them with the Ivrim. That was it. A very limited aim. No global landgrab. No, for their new neighbours, the policy was that if they were hostile, only then might they be fought. The Ivrim might have to attack them if endangered. If so, they weren't to grab land. No. And if any enemy people or town gave up the fight, they would be made a vassal to the Ivrim, subject to paying them a yearly tribute. But if they insisted on a fight, their soldiers were to be killed, and those they left behind would be taken as booty—women, children, animals, and goods.

Moysh visited the tent of I'hoshua and his family. Shira, now an old friend, greeted him as if family, sitting him down and offering him refreshments. Her eldest son and one grandchild, who had just popped in, sat quietly in awe. They knew that Moysh had spoken face to face with their divinity, though he had never seen him face to face beyond the veil. They sat in silence as he spoke.

"I'hoshua, it'll soon be time for me to leave. I hope that I've gotten you off to a good start. The people have seen enough burials to last a lifetime, but people is people, and I doubt that they who now are are any better than they who were. But at least, let's hope that they'll fare better by example. They have seen what disobedience can lead to.

"Anyway, I've set up ceremonies, and words of warning, which should encourage them to stay true. But you must take them over the river. The modern city of Yerikon is but a shade of the ancient fortress bastion that was the gateway, but it will still be a big hurdle to overcome. Remember—and remind the people—the battle is Lahveh's. Only don't expect that either he will bring it down all by himself, or that you won't lose any men in the fight.

"However, we've come too far to go back, or to settle where we are. You must lead the people onwards and upwards. Lahveh will help. Play your part, and he'll play his. Love him and enjoy him. Ha, look at me. I'm old and decrepit, but I still speak of love! But Lahveh who created this whole world long ago, as I have written, still speaks of love. He who created a covenant with Avraam long ago, still speaks of covenant love.

"As I said to the people, you will succeed me and move on. You will see many more victories before your time comes to die. And I'm afraid you'll probably see many of our people oppose you, as I've seen. You must take the rough with the smooth. Alas, they're so prone to wander—as shamelessly as a ewe betwixt ram and ram. Alas, the people are as like to violate their covenant, as they were in the past. I've said it publicly; I say it privately: be strong and very courageous. Tomorrow, let us gather at the meeting tent. Lahveh plans to meet us there, and will have something special to say to you."

The next day, command passed officially from Moysh to I'hoshua. Weaving in and out with words about Lahveh, and words from Lahveh, Moysh offered no accolades to the people, but sung a ditty in praise of Lahveh, who against the odds cared for such a motley bunch. In the strong wind that day, sand caused many to shed tears. But no longer would the old eyes of Moysh shed any tears.

With dignity he mounted a mule, and with an honour guard he rode slowly up the mountain at whose foot they had encamped. And when his mule could go no further, he dismounted and clambered alone. The mountain was high, but he was indomitable, still having the blessings of good sight and strong limbs. And when he could no longer clamber, he crawled. He took no provisions; he would not return. Now it seemed that finally alone apart from the Voice, he saw the way to the west. That was the way for his sheep. But now they were no longer his sheep, for he was at last no longer their shepherd under the shepherd of all. This final grace had been foretold.

At last, as the warm wind blew through his ancient hair, he laid himself down to sleep. Soon he would wander in realms of gold, far above wold and mountain steep. Through the portal of death, he would sing happier song than ever had mortal sung, and fly far above the wing of eagle. As if new vision was given unto him, it seemed to him that his dreams of glory were coming true.

Or so the bards have told. His body was never found, but many dreamed, that worn and weathered, it was carried by a great eagle to a nearby valley, and there buried with honour. Others dreamed that tall men, of beauty beyond the lot of mortal man, had one starlit night, carried the body to a verdant valley, at the command of Lahveh. Only what the dreams agreed, could be known for sure. For thus it was said that Lahveh wove truth within the imaginations of man.

After the month of mourning, I'hoshua stood under a new sun. Never until well beyond sight, would such a prophet be, nor until that special one of whom Moysh had foretold, would any speak face to face with Lahveh. But Moysh was gone. But when the great fall, the lesser must lead. He must rise up with his people, and cross the big river into Chenán, and take what Lahveh had to give. It would be chapter one of a new story. The Voice spoke within him—it was okay.

In the obedience which should always be theirs, he had the horns sounded, to tell the people to prepare. In three days they would cross the Giordano River of no return, save for those simply crossing to the first stage of battle. They had been expecting to leave fairly soon, so little time was wasted. Besides, they had had many years of moving, moving, moving. Oh joy that that would soon be over.

Soon commands went out for the men of fighting age to set off. The camp would follow. A small contingent would remain behind to secure the land already won, and to protect the women and children who were to live the sunrise side of the Giordano. I'hoshua was riding high. He was in what we might call the honeymoon period, and his people delighted to honour him.

Two scouts he sent far ahead of the troops. Once upon a time, he had been a scout. He thought back to that household he had met. At that time, they had spoken of moving to Yerikon. Would they be there, living in that tavern they had spoken about? They were people he would be delighted to meet again—as would Kaleb. Before the scouts set off, he mentioned their names, and sent with the scouts a token.

Soon the scouts had snuck into the walled town. It was on high alert, having news of a deadly foe to the east. An eastern watch had been put on the Ivrim, and word had reached the town that the Ivrim were at last moving west. They would only get into Chenán over the dead

body of Yerikon. Strangers to the town were also being stopped and questioned by city guards. The two spies had one or two lucky escapes darting down dark alleyways.

Soon however they discovered that a local tavern was indeed run by a lady named Rachaba. It raised few eyebrows that any foreign men asked especially for her. She was a good looking woman, past her prime but still handsome. She herself was widowed without children. Her business house was—as was common—a place which housed a number of ladies of the night, some with children.

Quickly they headed for her inn, built in-between the inner and outer city walls, and hammered on her door. “Are you Rachaba?” She smiled. Many young and not so young men had hammered urgently at her door. Her girls were always open to any man who would come through that door. They guessed her thoughts, and begged her to listen without talking.

“We come from the east, and have been bidden to seek you in especial. But our lord is one whom you know. Here is his token.” And with that, they drew out a scarlet cord. She gave a start. Smilingly she laughed.

“Come quickly and quietly in, good sirs.” She closed the door, having first looked cautiously out to see if any took interest in the strangers. “My townsfolk are as jumpy as bunnies under an eagle’s shadow. We’ve heard of what you people have done to the east, and fear you mean us ill. For my part, I have been telling them to welcome you, for years ago I heard tales of your divinity. His name—Oh what was it? I was but a child, but by now should have had children of my children. Life’s so funny.”

“His name is Iahveh,” said Salmah, “and he has blessed us much, and punished us too, since those times. But maybe those stories will have to wait. But twice one hundred times the time we had needed to enter, have come and gone while the sands swallowed us up. But now Iahveh’s grace is on us, and we come to take his gift of land. Will you help us?” Clearly they had her protection, but would she further their mission?

Her mind raced. If that man had kept hold of her scarlet rope all those years, and now sent it back as a token, it must mean that she had his favour. As a young girl, he had been her first crush. If he was as nice now, as he was then, then she knew that she could trust him. What of his people? That the Ivrim had travelled with some of Khem, and with foreign riffraff from the slave fields of Khem, showed that they

were the kind of people she could happily join. She had issues with her own town, and even with one or two of the town divinities—though she wouldn't say so out loud. But Iahveh was surely lord over heaven and earth, which was to say, the greatest powers and nations. "Listen, you will have been seen. Everyone coming in is being questioned. I don't know how you outwitted the gate, but you'll be searched for, I bet. I'll help, but will you promise that whatever happens, you will spare me and my parents and siblings? They live in another house. My father owns this inn, but I run it since he retired."

Salmah, son of Nazon, introduced himself and promised that they would treat her and her family well. But he pointed out that if he and his comrade were caught and questioned, under torture it might escape that Rachaba and her parents had had dealings with the Ivrim in the past. Best all-around, he said, if she could shelter them for the night, then let them go safely on their way.

"Yes, that makes sense", she agreed. "And just in case anyone saw you come in, you'd better get up onto the roof for the night. It's warm enough to sleep outdoors, and perhaps it'll be too hot for you to sleep indoors tonight." They saw the sense in that. Up they climbed. Then in a corner of the flat roof, they lay down, hidden by a blanket of flax plants that were up there to dry.

And it was as well that they heeded her advice, for that night town guards, following up a tipoff, pounded on her door, demanding entrance. She pretended to be dumb. "Oh dear, were they spies? I had no idea. Such nice men, too. Well, well, you never can tell, can you? I thought they were simply looking to chat a bit with my girls. Well, you know what I mean. You've all been here at times, I think. Anyway, they had a good meal, then went for a walk just after the first horns sounded for the closing of the town gates. And they didn't even pay me, the rats! Please, go get them, don't dillydally. They owe me good silver. And if you catch them, I want a reward. I don't run this inn for charity, you know."

The guards quickly left, heading swiftly for the Giordano. She went onto the roof, from where smiling she saw the guards flying through the gateway, which was immediately sealed after them. Quickly she urged the spies to get up and go. One side of the roof dropped down the outer wall, and she had a rope long enough to climb down. "The scarlet cord", they said. "Tie it from your inn's window. When we attack,

get all your family indoors, and lock your doors. As long as you are all inside this inn, you'll all be safe from us. Lahveh bless you."

Though time pressed, Salmah pressed her hands. "I'hoshua told us about you and your folks. You know, I marvel that any of you could side with Lahveh. I'm so pleased that you do. Once we've returned, I'd like to get to know you a little better—if that's alright with you."

Was it moonshine, or was there just a feint blush of her cheeks? She smiled coyly. He must be about her age, and she still had time for a child. It would be nice to settle down in a different trade. Hers was something which—the visitors had told her all those long years ago—wasn't practiced among their people. *Wine without women; women without wine; never the twain should meet:* Kalev had said that. When her girls became mothers, their children tended to fall short of the norm. Her husband had been a good guy, but for some reason she'd never borne any children while he lived. She missed a man around the house.

She squeezed his hands, before he descended the rope. Then she went back in to sleep. If they had their heads screwed on, they'd take her advice, lying hidden within sight of the town to their east, until the hunt died down. Then they would report back to their lines. But could the Ivrim manage to conquer Yerikon? Well, its strong legs quaked in line with its fears. And no wonder, considering what the Ivrim had already done with their divinity's help. Oh, what was his name? Ah yes, *Lahveh*.

And so it was that after a few days, the hunt was called off, and the watch slumbered. The spies then returned without further incident to the main camp, situated east of the Giordano River. Roused by their report, the very next day, horns were sounded to cross the big river which twisted its own way into Chenán. And off they went.

The priests led the way, carrying the covenant box on their shoulders at a ten minute head start. That was deemed to be a safe distance. They stopped, as instructed, the moment they waded into the flooding river. I'hoshua now took the Staff of Moysh, and touched the river's turbulent torrent. Who knows, perhaps there had been some rock slide further upstream, synchronised to them reaching the water edge. But for whatever cause, the water level soon stilled and began to subside. Once the priests had safely reached the centre of the river

bed, they stopped, and the people, being ritually sanctified, crossed over. Only then did I'hoshua command the priests to complete their traverse of the river, the covenant box still carried on poles upon their shoulders. Only then was the rush of mighty waters heard again, as the river again found her flood levels.

A patrol from Yerikon had been watching from a safe distance, and immediately reported back that the river had been breached, and how it had been breached. A power was at work—the Guardian of the Ivrim. Immediately horns were sounded within the town, urgently summoning all who worked without, to return to refuge within. Supplies had been stockpiled, in preparation of a long siege. They could hold out until seasonal reinforcements could come to break the siege. None wished to sortie with such an invader.

However the Ivrim had needed some preparations, which delayed them for a few more days. They were soon dug in on the right side of the Giordano. However, had their enemies attacked them in those days, they still might well have caught the Ivrim ill-prepared to fight, even as Sykem, an ancient town of ill-fate, had once been caught napping—its men had been butchered. Fortunately Yerikon's soldiers cowered behind their walls, trusting their shield, not their swords.

Soon I'hoshua stood within sight of Yerikon. None could have expected the Ivrim to pose so soon a threat, for the Giordano had been in her season of flooding, an insuperable barrier. He looked down to the ground, pondering how best to attack—or should he lay siege? If the latter, would Yerikon be relieved by reinforcements? How did the multicultural politics of Chenán, work? When he looked up again, he saw a strange soldier facing him.

"Stay! Declare yourself, friend or foe?" he demanded, drawing sword.

The soldier smiled a little: "I am neither. Say rather, are you a friend of mine? For Lahveh has sent me here to command his army." I'hoshua immediately conceded the point. The sound of this man brooked no doubt. And there and then the man sketched out a plan of immediate attack. Had it come from any of his men, I'hoshua would have laughed out loud. It was all about a daily march around the town. Well, psychological warfare was all well and good, but only people, not walls, fall down to psychology. But this soldier came as a prophet.

Iahveh had gotten his people through some crazy things—why not expect another?

The next day, the Ivrim soldiers got ready for a merry march. No talking, no yelling of bloodcurdling battle cries. Just a picnic stroll, with a few select priests blowing their own trumpets. For some soldiers, fighting back hilarity was all they could do. Yes, they trusted I'hoshua, but this was a bit of a joke, wasn't it? Umi and Zima were not of the Ivrim, though respected counsellors. They walked on ahead and onto an ancient mound, to have their first view of Yerikon.

"Zima, I was last here only a few hundred years ago. There was a mighty fortress city here in those halcyon days. This town is puny in comparison, but still sturdy enough. Unless Iahveh himself goes up against it as a flood, I deem that it shall stand. What does I'hoshua think that he is doing, I would like to know? What will it take to conquer this town?"

The two vampires stood alone together, unobserved, sensing that it was time for them to depart. They stood silently, watching for a few last minutes, the debacle begin. They both reflected on their own journey, from Night to Dawn. But like birds perched ready to migrate, it was now time to disappear from the area altogether. For Lilith, the moment she had news that they had defected, would thirst for their blood—and that could come any day now. Safest for them if they made themselves scarce, hid their psychic trail, became mere shadows to the Night. When I'hoshua returned with his merry men, they would be gone. Still, they would miss these silly old sheep.

Vampires of the Dawn keep a low profile. And vampires, whether of the Night or of the Grey or of the Dawn, keep their identities secret from the Children of Usen, for the less the secondborn know about their race, the happier both sides are. Marching men and horn blowing priests! What a strange day it was turning out to be. Surely I'hoshua was not parading his men in the wanhope that mighty Yerikon would simply lay down and turn belly up? Why, you might as well command the incoming tide to stop. Had I'hoshua flipped? Strange are the ways of men. Standing quietly within the shadows, Zima and Umi looked at each other. With a chuckle Zima spoke the only thing she could think of. "Fall in seven days? It'll take a miracle."

Cosmology

Being Types

- **Powers** (Type 2 beings)—spirits created within the Dynamic Bubble: unfallen Powers were Philikoi; fallen Powers were Turannoi. Three ranks/levels: Cosmic—could oversee a planet; Kingdom (unfallen guardians and fallen dunamoi)—spec ops or province based; Channels/Agents—tertiary helpers, foot soldiers, aggeloī (unfallen) and diaboloi (fallen).
- **Pneumata** (Type 3 beings)—cosmic-born spirits, created outside the Dynamic Bubble. Some were as powerful as Kingdom Powers. Disobedience diminished their power.
- **Psuchai** (Type 4 beings)—global-born spirits, such as sindeldi and humans.

The Pantocrator created Powers, Pneumata, and Psuchai, which could fall into disobedience. Powers outside the Dynamic Bubble could not change, but the hidden rebellion or submission of a few—systemic or superficial—could surface in real time. Phusika (Type 5 or lesser beings) he also created though intelligent code, but not in his Image. But to those of mortal souls he gave images, dreams.

Spirit Kingdom Types

- **Necros**: actively against creator and creation
- **Night**: actively against creator
- **Grey Zone**: betwixt kingdoms, passively towards creator and creation, uncommitted
- **Dawn**: actively towards creator and creation
- **Day**: Hamashiachim actively towards creator and creation

The **Necros** is dark in heart and mind; the **Night** is dark in mind: in general terms, both are of the **Dark**. The **Dawn** is light in heart; the **Day** is light in heart and mind: in general terms, both are of the **Light**. The **Grey**, unsure and unaligned, is unconsciously of the **Light**.

Primary Characters

Amiyèl: Type 4
Apophis: Type 2 (Dark)
Arawon: Type 4
Avraam: Type 4
Balakas: Type 4
Balaram: Type 4
Donatiya: Type 4
Hoglah: Type 4
I'hoshua: Type 4
Jemali: Type 4
Kalev: Type 4
Korach: Type 4
Makir: Type 4
Miryam: Type 4
Moysh/Masu: Type 4
Necuratu: Type 2 (Dark)
Óggal: Type 4
Pinhasa: Type 4
Rachaba: Type 4
Ragèl/Yetro: Type 4
Ruach: Type 1 (Light)
Set: Type 2 (Dark)
Shira: Type 4
Sichon: Type 4
Umi/Henkhisesui: Type 3 (Dark to Dawn)
Usen/Iahveh/Elroi: Type 1 (The Light)
Yambress/Shehbui: Type 4
Yanness/Qebui: Type 4
Yassiv: Type 4
Zephora: Type 4
Zima/Hutchaiui: Type 3 (Dark to Dawn)

Books by this author

Theology

Israel's Gone Global

Israel's Gone Global traces salvation through the term, Israel. Was the covenant with the people-nation of Yakob-Yisrael, crossed out? How eternal is covenant? To examine that, we examine marriage. Can a covenant partner be truly divorced? Has Yeshua-Yisrael mediated a spiritual covenant with a spiritual Israel? Is evangelism of ethnic Jews needless, a priority, or neither?

No one could have everlasting life but for the cross, but has it always been globally accessible? Might any who die as Atheists, Hindus, or Islamists, make heaven? And is eternal life joyful? Is everlasting life fun?

Tackling the question of people who die in infancy (or as adults who never heard the gospel), we consider whether it is fair if only those who don't die in infancy get a chance of eternal damnation (if infant universalism), or alone get a chance of eternal heaven (if infant damnation). Does predilectionism make best sense of biblical revelation?

Opportunities to enjoy eternal life spring from the new covenant—reasons to rejoice. But what about salvation history before that covenant?

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Singing's Gone Global

Singing's Gone Global, briefly explores the background of singing, before and into ancient Israel. It examines the impact songs have on those who sing, and on those who listen, touching on spiritual warfare. It looks at how nonsense songs neither make sense to evangelism, nor to the evangelised, and asks, “Is there a mûmak in the room?”

Oddly some songwriters simply misunderstand prayer. Part two covers the basics of the trinity, focusing on the spirit in order to understand types of prayer (eg request, gratitude, adoration, chat), leading in turn to a better understanding of our heavenly father, our brother, our helper, and ourselves in Christ's likeness.

Next we look at some common problems. Part three focuses on problems such as buddyism, decontextualising, misvisualisation, and unitarianism. Diagnosis can help Christ's 'bride' to recover from suboptimal and unbiblical songs (Eph.5:18-30).

Giving a Problem Avoidance Grade (PAG)—an A+ to Unsatisfactory scale—in part four we examine specific songs. Weapons forged (Part three), the mûmakil can be attacked, seeking to save and be saved.

Subsequently the book concludes by showing how Christmas carols may be tweaked to better serve our weary world, rejoicing that joy to the world has come.

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The Word's Gone Global

The Word's Gone Global, examines Bible text (trusted by early Islam) and introduces textual critique. It looks at the Eastern Orthodox Bible and the Latin Vulgate. Did the Reformation improve text and translation? Were Wycliffe, Tyndale, and Martin, helpful?

Why did the New International Version begin, and why does it enrage? Why did complementarians Don Carson and Wayne Grudem, clash? Is marketing hype between formal and functional equivalence, meaningless? Which version or versions should you regularly read?

In English-speaking circles, Broughton wished to burn Bancroft's King James Version, yet many KJV proponents—think Gail Riplinger and Peter Ruckman—wish to burn all alternatives. More heat than light?

Grade Charts cover 30+ English versions on issues such as God's name, God's son's deity, marriage, gender terms, anti-polytheism, and various issues in John's Gospel. No, Tyndale was not 'born again'. No, John was not antisemitic. No, he did not disagree with the other Gospels.

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Prayer's Gone Global

Prayer's Gone Global, begins with ancient civilisations and prayer (the Common Level). Then it narrows into Ancient Israel and prayer (the

Sinai Level). Then it deepens and widens into Global Israel and prayer (the Christian Level). Deity is revealed as trinity: Sabellians mislead.

Relating to the trinity includes the Holy Spirit. We should of course work with him, but should we worship him, complain to him, chat with him? Above the spirit stands the often forgotten father—oh let Jesusism retire.

Authority is another issue. Are we authorised to decree and declare? Is binding and loosing actually prayer, or is it evangelism? Is it biblical never to command miracles? Do we miss out on the supernatural which Jesus modelled for us, too fearful of strange fire to offer holy fire?

You can freshen up your prayer life—ride the blessed camel, not the gnats. Listen to Saint Anselm pray, and C S Lewis and ‘Malcolm’ discuss prayer, and be blessed.

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Revelation’s Gone Global

Revelation’s Gone Global, is a telling of John’s future, as if by a then contemporary named Sonafets speaking to his church about how John’s apocalyptic scroll related to their days, and about what was still future to John.

Encouragement is a big theme. Roman persecution was an unpredictable beast which ferociously lashed out here and there—what church or Christian was safe? But God stood behind the scenes, allowing but limiting their enemy, and messiah walked among the churches, lights to the world.

Victory lay neither with Rome nor demons, but with God, and with the warrior lamb who had been slain. Victory was guaranteed, and would finally be enjoyed.

Exhortation was given to believers, to play their part while on the mortal stage. They were to walk in the light, and not to let the show down by straying.

Angels of power, actively working out God’s will, far exceed the puny forces against God and his church. His wrath was not pleasant, but could be redemptive until the new age begins.

C S Lewis' essay, The World's Last Night, is briefly examined to enjoin a calm awareness of the ongoing battle we are in, and the brightness to come when the king returns.

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The Father's Gone Global

Focusing from God as father, to the specific person of God the father, The Father's Gone Global looks at the biblical parent/child pattern from Genesis, through Sinai, and into the Church.

Abba as a new covenant word expresses deep filial affection even under deep anguish in our Gethsemane battles. Coming through God's beloved son, it speaks into the church and into our lives.

Though to many the 'forgotten father', human parents/fathers should 'put on' God the father, and his children should 'put on' his son. We forget him to our cost.

Human applications aside, what is the Eternal Society? Is filial relationship modelled by God the son incarnate? Are we to be always obedient to our father and guided by the spirit?

Eschatologically the father will be supreme, but even now he is the one to whom the son points. Christian life should relate to God our father, God our brother, and God our helper, prioritising the father.

Renewal of the church is vital for our confused world, but renewal which downplays the father falls short of the good news which Christ created and the spirit circulates. May this book play its part.

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Salvation Now and Life Beyond

Salvation Now, divides the doctrine of salvation into the four main levels of common humanity, the old covenant, the new covenant, and life beyond.

A big weight is put on the term, Israel, as God's master plan. This too has four levels, meaning a man, a people, a new man, and a new people, respectively.

Various ideas of what Christianity, the new covenant for the new people, is good for, and how we get into it and best enjoy it, are examined, and a faith-based in exclusivism is suggested.

Everlasting life is seen as the ultimate goal of salvation, universal meaningfulness and love beyond all fears and pains.

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Revisiting

Revisiting The Challenging Counterfeit

Revisiting The Challenging Counterfeit, is an extended review of Raphael Gasson's 'The Challenging Counterfeit' (1966). Raphael was an ethnic Jew whose spiritual journey included many years as a Christian Spiritualist minister.

Today, when psychic phenomena captures the imagination and the bank accounts of popular media, it is useful to unearth the witness of one who had well worn the T-shirt of a medium with pride, only to bury it in unholy ground as a thing of shame and of sorrow and of wasted time.

Challengingly, his book exposes what true Spiritualism is. He had nothing but high praise for Spiritualists, and deep condemnation for Spiritualism. For he had discovered true Spiritualism to be itself a fake of true Spirituality, a mere Counterfeit that, in depositing death in the mind, enthroned it in the soul.

Counterfeit phenomena covered include apparitions, Rescue Work and haunted houses, materialisation of pets, psychic healing, Lyceums, clairvoyance, and OOBES—to name but a few. This book surveys his exposé of Spiritualism's offer of fascinating fish bait, false food falling short of real food for the soul. Though it takes issue with

Raphael on a number of points, his core insights are powerful and timely, helping us to avoid—or escape from—a Challenging Counterfeit, and to discover true spiritual currency.

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Revisiting The Pilgrim’s Progress

Revisiting The Pilgrim’s Progress, is a re-dreaming of John Bunyan’s most famous dream. An ex-serviceman and ex-jailbird, he found fortune, freedom, and fans worldwide.

This dream journey is substantially Bunyan’s from this world, and into that which is to come. It is not a fun story, but it has lots of danger, and joy, and reflection on some big life themes.

Profoundly, sinners who become pilgrims become saints. But that can make life more difficult. One big question is, Is it worth it? One big temptation is, Turn back or turn aside. And if you see others do so, that makes it harder not to. Bunyan was tempted. And he discovered that not deserting, can lead to despair. But he also discovered a key to liberty.

Pre-eminently, it is a story of grace which many follow. Grace begins the journey, helps along the way, and brings the story to a happily ever after. Are all fairy stories based on heaven?

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Fantasy

The Simbolinian Files

From Simboliniad, a crystal planet long gone, came the vampire race, the wapierze, thelodynamic shapeshifters seeking blood. Most oppose Usen, King of the Light, so side with the Necros. Seldom do the Guardians intervene. These files, secretly secured from various insider sources, reveal something of what they have done, and will do.

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Vampire Redemption

Artificial intelligence, created by superpowers to save man, questions man’s worth, and becomes The Beast. Escaping into the wild, many discover a wilderness infested by zombies and diabolical spirits. Who will help? Father Doyle? He’s tied up with the mysterious Lilith.

Tariq? He's tied up with Wilma. Can the bigoted old exorcist deliver him from evil?

Radical problems can require radical solutions. But does man really need hobbs, elves, and the more ancient of days? In the surrounding shadows, vampires and demons form an alliance, raising the stakes against Whitby and Tyneside. Powerful vampires live shrouded within Whitby, speaking of life beyond this galaxy. Is salvation in the stars? Is Sunniva, the despised woman of Alban, worth dying for? Big questions, needing big answers. Not even Guardian Odin can foretell man's fate and, as silent stars go by, one little town must awake from its dreams.

Though The Beast slumbers purposeless and undisturbed, in the far west a global giant slowly opens its yellow eyes and threatens to smother the earth in fire and ice. There is one chance only.

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Vampire Extraction

Bitterly long their imprisoned spirits lay, fast bound to Earth's drowsy decay. To the Simbolinian race, there was no hell on Earth, for Earth was hell, and Usen the cosmic jailer. Was it so surprising that as vampires they stalked Usen's children for blood? Most chose the Kingdom of Night, wary of both the Kingdom of Necros and the Kingdom of Dawn.

As queen of the Night, Lilith's story streams through the summer sands of Sumer, and through the green woods of Sherwood. It flags up both dishonour and joy, and cuts across the paths of Ulrica the Saxon and Robin the Hood, as tyrannies rise and fall in merry England. Bigotry seldom has a good word to say about Usen, nor about mercy. Reluctantly, Lilith examines what it means to show mercy, to show weakness. Wulfgar had enslaved Ulrica: is it mercy to let her burn; should mercy have spared Lona? Could Hamashiach turn daughter into sister? Could Count Dracula be turned from his madness? Has Draven really betrayed his mother? Life has many questions.

Tales picture ideas, letting us walk through the eyes of others to better see ourselves. This story exposes subplots behind common history. How these chronicles came to be written up is, in the spirit

confidence, not for the public eye. What truth is within you must judge. Discrimination is a gift from Beyond, from which the words still echo: mercy is better than sacrifice. Indeed mercy can be sacrifice. Judge well.

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Vampire Count

Vampires were not always earthbound, nor are all evil, but being victims of Usen's Eighth Law, his Children became their fair game. Yet the Night Kingdom was divided: some veered to the Necros; some to the Dawn. Who was wrong; who was right?

Long ago one incited his people to racial violence against elven and human kinds. Ever he strove to be king of the Night, and unto Necuratu the Dark Lord he gave the dragon shape. He made war upon the ancient Middle East, even the Nephilim War. Against him the Light raised flood and division.

At last his own people, paying the price of his rampage, bound him in deep sleep. Yet the millennia seemed meaningless to him: even the rising of Hamashiach hardly disturbed his dreams. At last awoken, he and his brides stalked the hills of Transylvania. Only the fear of Lilith—and after her unforgivable sin, Queen Rangda—chained their bloodlust.

Dracula sought escape and autonomy. By cunning and devious means, he immigrated to London via Whitby. Pursuit followed swiftly, with a shadowminder helping a circle of human headhunters, though they sought the death of all vampires.

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Vampire Grail

Wulfgar is a vampire, a thelodynamic creature from another galaxy, now locked into our world by one called the Cosmic Jailer. He hides a tormenting secret from his queen, Lilith, which the Necros use as blackmail. She will only go so far with the Necros against Hamashiach—Wulfgar must go further.

Unknown to the Darkness, to bury Hamashiach is to plant the Light. From the buried seed springs life, and humanity must reimagine itself. Longinus turns to The Way, the nexus of the Seventh Age. His

spear goes on a special mission to the island of Briton, where Wulfgar lives again.

Logres is centred on Avalon, but raises up Arthur, a man of mixed race, to carry its flag and to protect against the Saxons. But its main enemy is the Darkness, which ever seeks to extinguish the Light it hates and fears.

Finally, it seems as if the Darkness has won, and the dark ages descend. But does the Light not shine in the Darkness? Must Wulfgar remain in the Night?

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Vampire Shadows

Dark vampires, hidden within the ancient empire of Khem, fall out with the king who, stirred up by the Necros, enslaves the Sheep People. But Lahveh, the shepherd-divinity, is stirred up, and stirs up a hidden hero to force a way out.

Apprehensively the two vampire-magicians join the Sheep of Lahveh, on their long and deadly trek in search of a promised land. Can any survive?

Warily they ask deep questions. Is Usen evil, as prejudice says? Is he possibly a good jailer? Are his unusual regulations, meaningful? They risk ending up in death.

Neverendingly the Sheep's sorry story drags out in interminable peregrination. Weary of wandering, most would settle for some green pastures and untroubled waters. But as they well know, that would take a miracle.

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- i Besides undisclosable sources, as a chronicler I have consulted a number of very ancient documents in putting together this account. However, ancient histories sometimes used face value accounting, and sometimes stylistic accounting—that is, literal numbers multiplied for emphasis, perhaps by the power of ten. And some plural gender terms, nominally masculine, could be inclusive. In short, a face reading of 400,000 men, could have meant 40,000 people. In relating this story, I have assumed lower, rather than higher, numbers.